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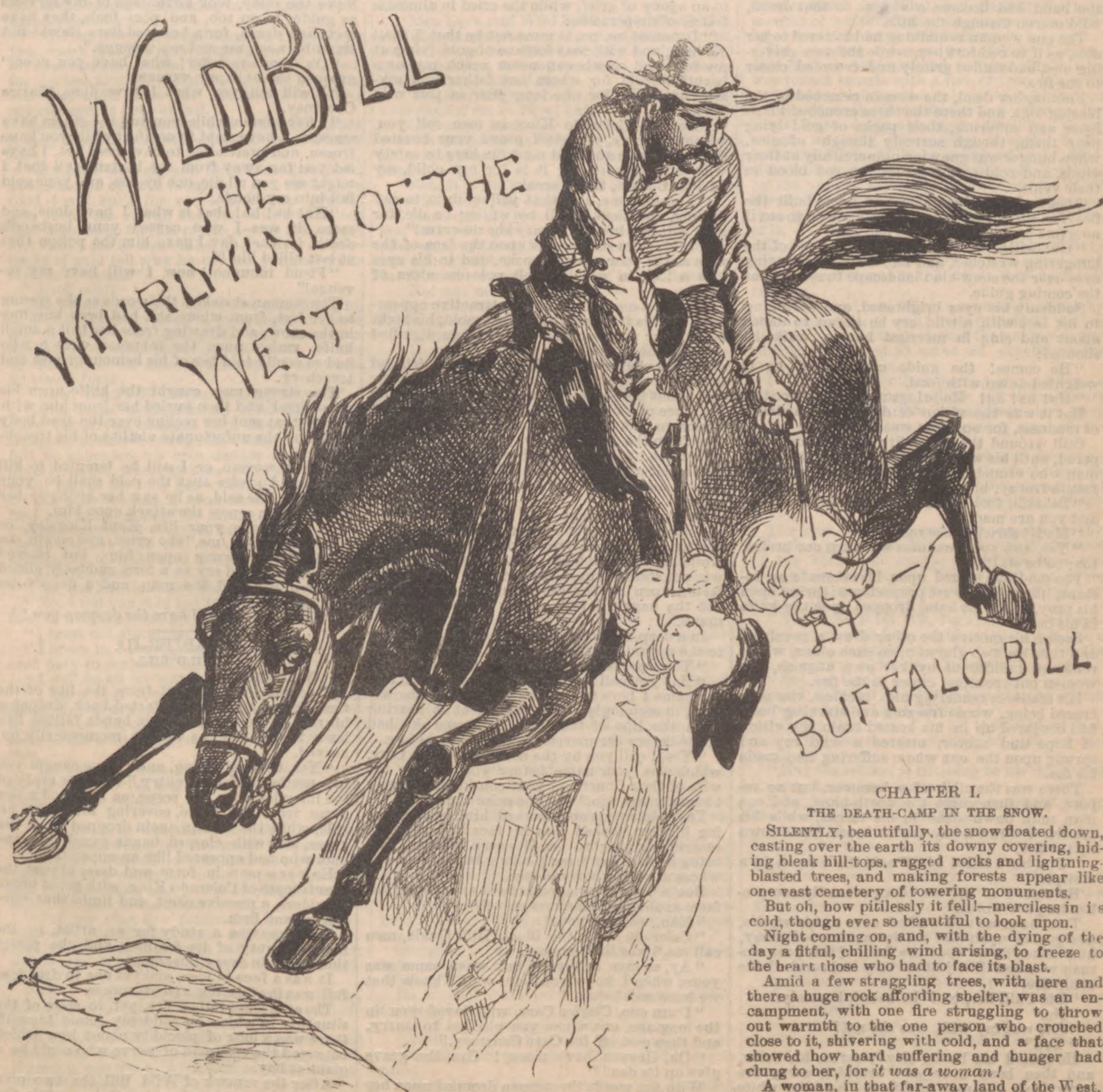
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CHAPTER I.

THE DEATH-CAMP IN THE SNOW.

SILENTLY, beautifully, the snow floated down, casting over the earth its downy covering, hiding bleak hill-tops, ragged rocks and lightning-blasted trees, and making forests appear like one vast cemetery of towering monuments.

But oh, how pitilessly it fell!—merciless in its cold, though ever so beautiful to look upon.

Night coming on, and, with the dying of the day a fitful, chilling wind arising, to freeze to the heart those who had to face its blast.

Amid a few straggling trees, with here and there a huge rock affording shelter, was an encampment, with one fire struggling to throw out warmth to the one person who crouched close to it, shivering with cold, and a face that showed how hard suffering and hunger had clung to her, for it was a woman!

A woman, in that far-away land of the West, bent over a miserable camp-fire, while about her were the forms of those who had shared her tortures and hardships until life's chain had

"YOU ARE MY GAME!" IN TRUMPET TONES CAME THE CRY, AS WILD BILL AND HIS HORSE CAME FLYING FROM THE CLIFF ABOVE.

broken under the strain, and the spirit had sped away from the frozen casket.

Here and there lay several forms, three in all, and the snow coming down was covering them with a shroud to hide them from the sight of her whose eyes constantly fell upon them.

And one of these three was a woman, who, starving and freezing, had laid down to die, with others of that ill-omened band that had, two weeks before, left the gold mines in the Black Hills, to return to their homes with fortunes in yellow metal which they had dug from the yielding earth.

Seven had started in all, and upon pack-horses they had carried their treasure, led by a guide who had warned them not to start in the face of coming winter, which might break upon them at any moment.

But they could not wait in those wilds through the long Arctic months, when they had their fortunes secure, and urged the guide to lead the way.

First their horses had broken down, and then, in a blinding snow-storm, the guide had admitted that he was lost, and days were passed in wandering about the wilds where no human aid could they hope to find.

Clinging to their gold they had staggered along with it upon their shoulders, unwilling to give it up, and throwing food away for their treasure.

One by one they had fallen by the wayside, but, unburied by their comrades, the dead had remained there, while the living toiled on, staggering, suffering with cold and hunger, yet clinging to their gold.

At last the spot was reached where the end must come, and three persons tottered up to the fire which the guide had built, but the fourth fell ere she reached it, and the second woman of the band had become a victim to that dread, wild march through the hills.

The one woman remaining had tottered to her side, as if to comfort her, while the two shivering men had smiled grimly and crowded closer to the fire.

Finding her dead, the woman returned to the blazing logs, and there the three crouched in silence and suffering, their packs of gold lying near them, though scarcely thought of now, when hunger was gnawing unmercifully at their vitals, and cold was freezing the red blood in their veins.

Ahead of them the guide had gone, built the fire for their camp, and then gone on to see if no game could be found, he had said.

"Oh! will he never come?" groaned one of the hungering wretches, and he turned his longing eyes over the snow-clad landscape to search for the coming guide.

Suddenly his eyes brightened, and springing to his feet with a wild cry he began to dance about and sing in merriest humor, while he shouted:

"He comes! the guide comes! and he is weighted down with food."

"Ha! ha! ha! He brings us delicious food!" But it was the vision of delirium, the dance of madness, for no guide was in sight.

Still around the camp-fire the madman capered, until his wild humor fell upon the other man who crouched there, and springing to his feet in frenzy, he shouted:

"Be still, fool, for I see no guide returning, and you are mad."

"Mad!" shrieked the maniac.

"Yes, and your madness will turn our brains, too; so be still!"

The madman gazed upon his comrade an instant, like a wild beast preparing to spring upon his prey, while his hand dropped upon the knife in his belt.

Seeing his motive the other drew a revolver, and thus the two glared upon each other, while, rendered indifferent by her own anguish, the woman but crouched closer to the fire.

His madness rendering him reckless, the poor crazed being, whose freezing and starving body had conjured up in his heated brain the vision of hope and succor, uttered a wild cry and sprung upon the one whom suffering had made his foe.

There was the click of a hammer, but no report, and then came the death-blow, and one man sunk down dead in his tracks, while his murderer threw away the knife and knelt down by the fire.

"You have killed him!" said the woman in a whisper.

He stared at her as though hardly comprehending her words.

Then he arose and walked over to his victim, and gazing upon him an instant turned away, and looked down upon the form of the poor woman who had died just as they had reached the camp-fire.

"Did I kill her, too?" he asked, hoarsely.

"No."

"She was my wife, was she not?"

"Yes."

He passed his hands slowly across his brow, and then bent over and brushing away the snow from the upturned face, kissed the white lips.

For a long time he bent above that form, his eyes fixed upon those that would see him never-

more, while he kept brushing away the snow as it fell, and which mercifully seemed to wish to place its white, feathery shroud over the dead to hide it from view.

At last the hand rested upon the face, and the man had no power to raise it.

Then the head drooped, a groan broke from the lips, and the man dropped over upon his side, the fifth victim of the little band of seven.

And at the camp-fire crouched the lone woman, while the snow came down to cover up the dead, and the wind went moaning through the valley, as night came on, in chilling, fitful blasts.

"Oh God! will he never come back with food, and must I, too, die here?" groaned the woman, raising her clasped hands pitifully above her head, as though imploring succor from the leaden skies that sent down the merciless snow upon her.

"I have come back; but I have no food for you, Kate Courtney!"

The words fell in deep tones upon the ears of the startled woman, and turning, she beheld the tall, buckskin-clad form of the guide standing within a few feet of her, and leaning upon his rifle in a careless way, as though he dreaded not the cold and hunger which had caused others to die.

CHAPTER II.

THE TREACHEROUS GUIDE.

"THEN, alas! we are doomed!"

The words were uttered with the calmness of despair by the woman, while the guide stood by in silence.

Then, as though realizing what she had to suffer, and, through her death, the misery that must fall upon one other, she sprang to her feet in an agony of grief, while she cried in almost a frenzy of desperation:

"Doomed! no, no, it must not be that I shall die here, and with that fortune of gold lying at my feet, and which can never reach my own beautiful child for whom her father and myself have toiled for one long year in this wild land."

"No, no, Colorado King, as men call you, you must prove, you shall prove your boasted skill as a guide and lead me from here to safety with my treasure, for it is for my child, my darling Clarice, that I speak."

"Yes, take me, and that yellow dust, to my darling, and then I will be willing to die, for gold will buy her the luxury she deserves!"

A cold, grim smile came upon the face of the man as the poor woman spoke, and in his eyes was a look in which dwelt not one atom of pity.

He was a man of strangely attractive appearance, for his form was of perfect mold, his height being over six feet, and his carriage dignified and elegant.

He was clad in a suit of buckskin, the fringed leggings being stuck in the tops of heavy boots, and about his shoulders hung a blanket, serving the place of a cloak, while the rim of his broad sombrero was turned down so as to shield his face from the driving snow.

Beneath his heavy hunting-coat of buckskin was a belt of arms, and the rifle upon which he leaned most gracefully was a Winchester repeater.

The face of the man was cast in shadow by the slouch hat, and the lower features were hidden by a dark-brown beard that fell to his waist, while his hair was long and waving; but there was not stamped upon his face the look of suffering worn by the others, and his eyes wore not the haggard look which dwelt in the woman's.

In a deep, cold tone the guide spoke in answer to the appeal of the woman:

"You are doomed to die here, Clarice Carr."

"Ha! you call me by name, Colorado King! the name I bore as a young girl!" cried the woman, in seemingly utter amazement at hearing from the lips of the guide the name she had borne before her marriage, long years before.

"Yes, I call you by the name of Clarice Carr, which was your name before you became the wife of Carr Courtney, your cousin, now nearly twenty years ago," was the calm reply.

The woman sprang toward him, and, grasping his arm, looked into his face in a way that seemed striving to recall every feature, and bring back to her from the long-buried past one whom she had known before.

But a look of disappointment swept over her face, as she said, in a broken voice:

"Man, who are you?"

"Colorado King, the Black Hills Guide, men call me," was the response.

"Ay, so men call you; but what name was yours when I knew you?—for well I know that we have met before."

"I am one, Clarice Carr, who loved you in the long-ago, one whom you pledged to marry, and then cast off for Carr Courtney."

"Oh, Heaven, have mercy! Can the grave give up its dead?"

With the words the woman dropped upon her knees in the snow, and nervously wringing her hands gazed into the face of the man before her.

"The grave never held me, Clarice," was the grim reply.

As though thinking aloud, the woman muttered:

"Yes, he killed a man, was tried and sentenced to death, and I believed that he had died on the gallows."

"Yes, I did kill a man, one whom I hated, and I was sentenced to die at the rope's end, Clarice; but I escaped death on the gallows the very night before the day upon which I was to have been executed, though I took life again in gaining my freedom."

"I was forced to fly to this far-away land, else you never would have married Carr Courtney, for I had sworn to kill him before he should call you wife."

"That was a long time ago, Clarice, yet I have not forgotten my oath of vengeance, as you shall know and feel."

"I knew your husband when he came West two years ago, though he, believing me dead, failed to recognize in the heavily bearded man the beardless youth he had known in the long-ago."

"He told me of the loss of his wealth, and how he had come West to hunt for gold."

"I professed friendship for him, led him to the Black Hills, and then, while I could find no gold, his good luck clung to him, and he found a mine in which he knew there was a fortune."

"Then he was taken sick, and began to fade away, and I wrote the letter to you which caused you to seek him here, as a dutiful wife should."

"At last he died, and he left to you and his child his gold, and I pledged him to guide you to the Overland and see you safely started for home with your treasure."

"But others, knowing of your intention to leave the mine, took advantage of my services as guide, to go too, and, poor fools, they have met their death, for a hundred lives should not stand between me and my revenge."

"Oh, man! monster! what have you done?" groaned the unhappy woman.

"I will tell you what I have done, Clarice Courtney."

"I have eaten while you and the others have starved; I have slept in comfort while you have frozen, and pretending to have been lost, I have led you far away from the beaten trail that I might see you all die, one by one, and your gold fall into my hands."

"Ha! ha! ha! that is what I have done, and more, it was I who caused your husband's death, for each day I gave him the poison that at last killed him!"

"Fiend inhuman! now I will have my revenge!"

The woman shrieked the words as she sprang to her feet, from where she had been kneeling in the snow, and drawing from her belt a small knife, rushed upon the inhuman wretch, who had so coolly told her of his heinous crimes and treachery.

The strong man caught the knife upon his rifle-barrel, and then hurled her from him with a force that sent her reeling over the dead body of one of the unfortunate victims of his treachery.

"Back, woman, or I will be tempted to kill you, and I prefer that the cold shall be your destroyer," he said, as he saw her rising to her feet to again renew the attack upon him.

"I will have your life, Kent Kingsley, or force you to kill me," she cried, and again she would have sprung upon him, but started back with a wild cry as a form suddenly glided between her and the man, and a deep voice said calmly:

"Colorado King, I have the drop on you!"

CHAPTER III.

WILD BILL.

"WILD BILL!"

The name fairly burst from the lips of the treacherous guide, as he started back, dropping his rifle in the snow, and his hands falling listlessly to his side, as though momentarily unnerved.

"Yes, Colorado King, and I have caught you in a pretty piece of devilry," was the reply of the intruder upon the scene, as he stood a few paces from the guide, covering him with his rifle, while the woman again dropped upon her knees, and with clasped hands gazed upon the man who had appeared like an apparition.

He was a man in form and dress almost the counterpart of Colorado King, with great broad shoulders, a massive chest, and limbs that were sinewy and firm.

His face was a study for an artist, in the manly beauty of its features, and the power that dwelt in every lineament.

It was a face to love, and yet one to dread, so full was it of daring and sternness.

The eyes were full of fire, yet, in spite of the situation in which he suddenly found himself, there was a look of placidity about him which betrayed the cool man of nerve who could be a giant at bay.

After the remark of Wild Bill, the two men stood facing each other in silence, while the woman crouched down near them, gazing in an agony of suspense upon them, and the snow

fell in great white flakes, as though anxious to enshroud the dead forms lying near wholly from sight.

"Wild Bill, this is no affair of yours, and I shall hold you responsible for your interference," said Colorado King, sternly, feeling that he had to speak and break the death-like, painful silence there in that driving snow-storm.

"Colorado King, I have long suspected that you were crooked, but could not prove my suspicions.

"Now I find you alone in this wilderness, threatening a woman, and with the dead bodies of her friends lying almost at your feet.

"Have you killed them, I ask?"

"How dare you ask me such a question, Wild Bill Hickok?"

"I ask the question because appearances are against you, and I shall expect an answer.

"I took your trail in the snow, and wondering what could have brought you away up here, determined to follow and find out just who and what your party was.

"I find your camp, and in it those who may have died by your hand, and again I ask you, did you kill those people, Colorado King?"

"I did not kill them," was the angry response of the guide.

"Oh, sir, do not believe him, for, though he did not shoot them down, or drive a knife to their hearts, he led us into these wilds, told us that he had lost his way, and freezing and starving, he had kept us wandering about until human nature could stand no more, and I alone remain.

"Look upon those haggard, suffering, pinched faces," and the woman sprung quickly to the dead bodies and brushed away the snow from them.

Then she turned her own face toward Wild Bill and continued, speaking in the same rapid, earnest manner:

"And see how white and haggard I am, while that man's face has upon it the glow of health, his eyes are not sunken, his form is not wasted, for he has secretly eaten food, when we were starving, and I alone now live, but God knows my strength is gone at last."

Again she sunk down, and Wild Bill made a step toward her, while he said in a kindly tone:

"My poor woman, you have indeed suffered at the hands of this man; but you shall have food, I will build for you a shelter, to protect you from the storm, and you will live to see that man hang for his crime, for he is no more lost than I am in these hills, and yonder saddle-packs of gold tell why he has led you and your friends to death."

"Look out!"

The woman shrieked the words, and springing to her feet rushed forward, as though to shield her protector from the guide, who had taken advantage of Wild Bill's interest in the woman to suddenly cover him with his revolver, while he hissed forth:

"Now, Wild Bill, I have the drop on you."

Under other circumstances Wild Bill would have taken the chances of a death-shot and struggle, but now, seeing the woman totter and fall, he unheeded his own danger and jumped quickly to her side, catching her in his strong arms, just as her long hair swept the snow.

"My poor woman, I must at once give you food and care for you," he said, quickly.

A spasm crossed the face of the woman, and for an instant Wild Bill believed that she was dying; but then she said softly:

"It is too late."

"No, no, I will rebuild the fire, and—"

"No, I tell you it is too late for warmth and food to help me now, for I am dying."

"I trust not sincerely."

"I know it, I feel it, and I leave to you a sacred duty to perform."

"I will do all for you that I can."

"I know that you will, for I have heard men speak of you as one who never broke his word to friend or foe, one who has a noble heart, in spite of the wild life you lead, and I will trust you."

"Do you see those packs of gold there?" and she motioned with her eyes toward the snow-covered pack-saddles.

"Yes."

"All are mine but three, and they belonged to those dead there, the victims of that man."

"My poor husband, whom that man poisoned, as he but now confessed to me, dug the treasure out of these hills, and I was bearing it back to my child, and to her I leave it all."

"Tell her that her father died in the gold-mines of the Black Hills; tell her that her mother perished in a storm, while coming back to her, and bid her be happy with her inheritance."

"Here you will find her name and address, and now give me your word that you will do as I, a dying woman, ask you!"

She placed in his hands a small leather wallet which she had drawn from her bosom, and, grasping her hand, Wild Bill said, in a deep, distinct voice:

"So help me Heaven, I will do as you request and if I break the pledge I make you, may God be merciless to me!"

"Never shall you keep that pledge, Wild Bill!"

The words came savagely from the white, stern lips of Colorado King, the guide, who had stood in silence, with baleful glare and angry brow, gazing upon the scout and the dying woman, his revolver held covering the former.

Now, as he hissed forth the words, he raised his weapon, until the muzzle covered the head of Wild Bill, and his finger quickly touched the trigger.

A flash, report, and a wild shriek from the woman mingled together, and Wild Bill sunk down without a groan, a red current flowing from the wound in his head where the bullet had cut its cruel way along.

CHAPTER IV.

COLORADO KING'S TRIUMPH.

"Now, Kate Courtney, I hold the winning hand once more, for there lies your protector, the invulnerable Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West, as men call him, and you are again at my mercy, and your gold is mine—do you hear? Your gold, dug by your husband, my foe, by long months of toil, is mine."

The man bent over the woman as he spoke, gazing into her eyes with a fiendish look of hatred and triumph blended.

She half-supported herself upon one hand, which rested upon the broad breast of Wild Bill and she looked into the face of her cruel foe with an expression that seemed dazed, as though she could hardly take in the full meaning of his words.

Seeing this, Colorado King went on in the same meaning way:

"That man's pity for you, Kate Courtney, cost him his life, for he should have let you die ere he took the muzzle of his rifle off of my heart."

"Men have said Wild Bill could not be killed, and his numerous escapes have so led them to believe; but he has fallen, and by my hand, and glad am I that his end has come, for I frankly confess that I feared him."

"Yes, feared him, and he is the only man that ever caused me to dread him."

"Oh, man! inhuman wretch that you are, what a punishment for your crimes will you have hereafter," said Mrs. Courtney, in a low tone.

"Bah! it is the present, that I look to, not the hereafter, my dear Kate."

"And with my revenge against you complete, and with your gold, and the treasure of those who were with you in this march, fatal for you but triumphant for me, I will be a rich man, and far from these scenes will revel in my riches."

"No! no! no! you will not rob my poor child of her inheritance!" cried the woman, imploringly, striving in vain to rise to her feet.

"Certainly I shall."

"May God's curse rest upon you, Kent Kingsley, and this prayer for your life to be accursed comes from the lips of a dying woman!"

She had risen to her knees as she uttered these words in a most impressive manner, with one hand pointed at the man before her, the other raised toward Heaven, as though invoking Divine aid.

In spite of his nerve, the man shuddered at her bitter anathema, but said, in his cutting tones:

"Kate Courtney, what care I for your curses so long as I have your gold?"

"Ay, and now I remember that your husband, Carr Courtney, told me one night in his cabin that he had already sent to his child half of his diggings, so I will know where to get more."

"Let me see: she is now about eighteen, I should judge, and what more natural than that I should seek her out, tell her of the sad death of her loved parents in my arms, and how I bent over them until the last, and to my guardianship she was left."

"Why, this is a glorious thought, and if she is half as beautiful as you were, Kate, when of her age, then I may make her my wife and thus get her fortune."

"Hal! hal! what think you of this, Kate Courtney?"

He fairly started back as the woman sprung to her feet, with a look in her face that was appalling.

Two steps she made toward him, her defenseless hands extended as though to grapple with him in a despairing death-struggle, and then with a shriek that severed the very heart-strings that held the flickering flame of life to her worn body, she fell her length in the snow prone upon her face.

Stepping toward her, the man bent over and lightly felt the slender wrist.

"Dead!"

He uttered the word in a low, hoarse voice, for even he felt crushed by guilt.

"And this is your end, Kate Courtney?"

"Well, your loss has been my triumph, your death my gain, and the fortune you have is mine."

"Yes, I need fear no robbery of my gold now, with winter setting in, and I will hide my gold-packs in yonder heap of rocks, and return for them when the spring shall have come."

"And you, Wild Bill, must remain here with the rest, for I dare not rob you of your arms, as they are too well known."

"Well, the falling snow will soon bury you, and until the spring melts your icy covering, your fate will not be known, and then, when found, men will say that you perished in the storm."

"Hal! hal! the tide of my ill-fortune has changed, and a bright future is before me."

"Ah! how savagely the wind howls now, and how heavily the snow comes down, warning me to get back to the trail I know, for to remain here will be death to me too."

As he uttered the last words he went over to the pack-saddles, loaded with precious metal, and which had been carried by his starving, freezing victims to that fatal death camp, and hastily raising them in his strong arms, he bore them to a pile of rocks near by and dropped them in a large crevice.

Having completed his work of biding this ill-omened gold, he cast a shuddering glance at the woman's outline, for the snow had mercifully screened her form from sight, and seizing his rifle he strode rapidly away from the death-camp where lay the victims of his hate and greed for gold.

CHAPTER V.

THE WHIRLWIND'S FLIGHT.

"Heavens above! there is Wild Bill!"

The speaker staggered backward as though he had seen a ghost, and clutched at the doorway which he was just about to enter for support, while, though the air was icy without, great beads of sweat flecked his forehead, as though his brain and heart were on fire.

The scene was a frontier post in Dakota, and the soldiers, settlers, trappers, hunters and miners there assembled, and passing the long months of winter, made the camps a busy village of cabins, tents and stables.

Commanding the post was Colonel Dangerfield Burr, a distinguished cavalry officer, who was forced to rule with a rod of iron the wild and reckless spirits under him or have his camps a scene of constant confusion and carnage, for there were desperate men dwelling there, miners awaiting the coming of spring to invade the Black Hills in search of gold, fugitives from justice, ready to better their fortunes by the robbery of others, and hangers-on of all border forts, ever ready to draw a weapon upon the slightest provocation and make deadly use of it.

It was into the head-quarters of Colonel Burr that the man was going, when he started back and gave utterance to the words that open this chapter.

He had been sent off on a scouting outlook by the commandant, and had returned just as night came on, to report that the snow was not sufficiently melted to make an expedition far from camp possible.

Passing the outer door he had glanced into a cheerily-lighted room, where sat Colonel Burr before a blazing log fire, to suddenly start back as his eyes fell upon a man leaning against the mantle.

It was a man of large stature and imposing appearance, notwithstanding the fact that he was clad in the skins of wild beasts, and had hanging from his broad shoulders a large bear-robe.

The man, who had instantly recognized in this skin-clad individual Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West, had hastily closed the door and stepped back into the hallway of the cabin head-quarters, unseen by either the colonel or his visitor.

"Yes, it is Wild Bill, for there is no mistaking that splendid form of his, clad as it is like a wild beast; and that stern face, in spite of the rough growth of beard, I know but too well."

"But, in God's name, how comes he here, when I believed him lying beneath the winter snows up in the Black Hills?"

"Great God! am I to be thwarted at last, just as the snows are melting to give me my treasure?"

"Hal! the colonel is listening to his story, and if I stay here I am doomed."

"Ay, the morning sun will see me strung up to a tree in the fort parade-ground."

"I will be off, but not alone, for I will force those whose secrets I hold to accompany me."

The man turned quickly away and left the head-quarters cabin, wending his way toward a distant part of the post, where were a group of log huts.

Here dwelt the ruder characters of the camps, the untamed bordermen who were as hard to manage as a menagerie of wild beasts.

In the larger cabin of the group were gathered a motley throng, gambling, chatting, smoking and drinking.

In fact, it was what Colonel Burr had correctly named "Pandemonium Hall," and a Babel of voices, oaths and song greeted the man who entered in such haste.

"Hello, Colorado King! has you seen a ghost?" cried one.

"You is pale as a yaller tiger-lily," said another.

"Yes, I have seen a ghost," said Colorado King, abruptly cutting off the remarks he knew would follow, and he added quickly, addressing different individuals by name:

"I want you, Slugger Sam, and you, Dead Beat Dick, to get two pardes each and come with me at once."

"What! yer hain't goin' scouting in the face of a snow-storm, pard, for there is ice in ther air?" said the burly fellow addressed as Slugger Sam.

"I am going scouting, Sam, and in the face of a snow-storm, and you will find it safer to go with me than to remain here."

The last remark was in a low tone, and delivered in so significant a manner that Slugger Sam at once sprung to his feet well knowing that Colorado King's pale face indicated trouble of some desperate nature on hand.

As the guide and his two confederates left the cabin, the man who answered to the suggestive cognomen of Dead Beat Dick asked:

"What's up, pard?"

"The colonel knows that the six *supposed* Indians who attacked the Government supply-train last fall were men from this post, and so you must be off with me at once if you wish to save your lives."

"Jewlikins! does you mean it?" cried Dick.

"I do."

"It is bad fer us, Colorado King, for death stares us in the face to go into these mountains now," returned Slugger Sam.

"Well, stay here and hang then, but I go," was the angry reply.

"Oh! do you go?" both asked together.

"Yes."

"What has the colonel got ag'in' you, for you wasn't in that leetle Injun-disguise business?"

"He thinks I planned it, and if you are going with me, you have no time to lose."

"I'm going with you, pard."

"And me, too."

"Then get your comrades, and meet me at the south gate."

"On horseback?"

"Of course, and get together all the provisions you can, though if we do not get off within half an hour we'll be lost."

So saying, Colorado King turned abruptly away and sought his own cabin, where he hastily gathered together what things he could take with him, and in a quarter of an hour was at the appointed rendezvous.

One by one the others joined him there until all had arrived, and seven in number they rode out of the fort, the sentinel on duty there telling them it was a bad night to go out upon a scout, for a snow-storm was threatening.

"Which way, cap'n?" asked Slugger Sam, as they left the fort behind them.

"To Lost Canyon, until this snow-storm is over," was the reply.

"And then?"

"And then I intend to road-agent on the gold trails to the Black Hills and make a fortune for all who join me," was the stern rejoinder.

Not a word of response was made to this bold declaration of outlawry, though the men, reckless as they were, started at the daring words.

And on in silence through the snow they went, Colorado King leading, and his brain full of bitter thoughts and daring schemes.

Not one other of that band could have guided the party in safety through the snow-covered trails and darkness; but unerringly Colorado King led them on, and at last halted at the head of a small canyon.

"Place the horses in yonder thicket and here we camp," ordered the leader, and a fire of logs was quickly built under the shelter of a cliff, and the men crouched around it for warmth, while the winds swept above their heads.

And thus the night passed away, and the dawn ushered in a snow-storm which rendered it impossible for them to move on their trail to safer quarters.

In gloomy silence they ate their breakfast, and then crouched closer to the fire, for the snow was descending in blinding masses, and a day of discomfort was before them.

Suddenly they started, for they heard distinctly a sound above the cliff, as though a man had spoken in angry tones.

Then the sky was darkened above their heads, and in mid-air was seen a horse and rider, coming straight down into an immense snow-drift at one side of their camp.

The horse was black as night, and had taken the leap in splendid style, while his rider sat upright in the saddle, his cloak ends thrown back over his shoulders, the reins about his neck, and holding in each hand a revolver which began to flash as man and beast descended.

In horror the outlaws started up, while there came ringing in their ears the words of doom to them:

"Hands up, men! You are my game!"

In trumpet tones came the cry, as Wild Bill and his horse came flying from the cliff above.

CHAPTER VI.

A FOE TO THE RESCUE.

THERE are many men in this world who seem to bear charmed lives, for peril of all kinds they

pass through where others fall by accident, as it were.

More reckless, and the most conspicuous in daring, leaders of forlorn-hopes in battle, yet they pass unscathed through fire and death-scenes, while others drop by their side to die.

Such a man was Wild Bill, and though in the end he came to an untimely death at the hand of an assassin, he had escaped from boyhood so many dangers, passed through hundreds of deadly combats unhurt, and when, at times proven vulnerable by fearful wounds, had "dodged Death," so to speak, and recovered, that men called him invulnerable.

Certain it seemed, when shot down by the hand of Colorado King as he was, that Wild Bill's career had then and there ended in those wild hills, and amid that driving snow-storm.

And yet the bullet from the assassin's revolver, though unerringly aimed, had not penetrated the massive head to the seat of life, but glancing along the skull had cut its way through the scalp and continued its flight.

The shock, however, had dropped the strong man like dead, stunning him into an unconsciousness that seemed like death, and was so near akin to it that it deceived the treacherous guide, who gloated over the fact of having killed one whom he feared, and who, he knew well, had never liked him.

Having hidden his gold and gone rapidly away from the death-camp, anxious that the gathering gloom should not find him within sight of those he had slain, Colorado King had made his way toward the trail which he knew well he could follow in spite of the snow-storm, and little dreamed that one whom he had left prone upon the ground had shaken the white masses from him and risen to a sitting posture.

That one was Wild Bill.

He looked about in a strange way, feeling before him and about him, as though in darkness, and then allowing his hand to rest upon the wound on his head.

"I heard voices, and one was speaking, whose tones I can never forget—ay, and his words, too, shall be remembered, for they were threats against a dying woman."

"Ah! my eyesight is returning, though I feel strangely dizzy."

He passed his hands across his forehead slowly for a while, and then pressing some snow upon his wound, bound his handkerchief over it.

Then, with an effort, he arose to his feet and staggered like a drunken man to a tree near by, where he leaned for support.

Missing his rifle he searched for it, and smiled grimly as he shook the snow from its glittering barrel.

Leaning once more against the tree, he glanced over the desolate camp, watching the fire as it died away under the falling flakes.

"Hal the gold-packs are gone!"

He uttered the words quickly, as his eyes fell upon the spot where they had been, and then in a dazed way he said:

"It seems to me that I heard him talk of hiding the gold until spring."

"Indeed, he could not carry it all with him, were the trails not incumbered with snow, without the aid of a horse."

"Yes, there goes his trail toward the valley, and he will make his way to the fort with all dispatch."

"Ay, and those tracks are where he carried the gold-packs to a hiding-place in yonder rocks."

"I am in luck, for had I remained unconscious much longer, or darkness come on, I would have found no trace of where he had hidden the riches of those poor people whom he murdered."

Still staggering, as though his brain reeled, he went to the spot where he had last seen the gold-packs, and then followed the tracks of Colorado King to their hiding-place in the rocks.

Hardly had he discovered the secret the guide had hoped was his alone, when he heard a sound which at once riveted his attention.

His practiced ears told him that the sound was a horse, struggling at his greatest speed through the snow, and hardly had he come to this conclusion, when an animal dashed into view, urged hard by his rider.

It was an Indian pony, beautifully spotted with white and black, with a tail of intense blackness, and a mane that was as spotless as the snow through which it made its way.

That the animal was tired out was evident, for it ran with every indication of distress, yet was kept to its hard pace by its rider, whose quick glances behind showed that flight was an imperative duty to escape more deadly danger.

And that rider was an Indian girl.

Young, slenderly formed, and strangely beautiful for one of her race, she sat upon her flying pony, her long raven hair floating far out behind her, and one hand grasping a bow and a single arrow, the last from her quiver, which hung empty by her side.

As she drew near the rocks, amid which Wild Bill crouched, she glanced again over her shoulder, and uttered a startled cry to her pony, as her eyes fell upon her pursuers dashing into sight from a thicket not a hundred yards away.

"That is a Blackfoot girl chased by Sioux,"

muttered Wild Bill, as he saw a chief and four warriors come in view, and urge their horses hard in chase.

"Both tribes are my foes, but I take sides with the girl every time, for those red devils are gaining rapidly," said the scout, and he brought his Winchester rifle around ready for use.

"I'm half-blind, and as dizzy as a drunken man, but I guess the old gun will find a Sioux heart," he muttered, just as the Indian girl swept by within a few yards of him, and, in her anxiety to escape from the foes of her people, unnoticing the white man, or the tracks about the death-camp.

But, hardly had she gone by, when she was startled by a ringing war-cry, which awoke the echoes of the hills and rocks far and wide, and at the same instant she beheld the tall form of Wild Bill spring from his covert and throw his rifle to his shoulder, the brave man disdaining to fire upon his enemies from an ambush.

At the first crack of his rifle the Sioux chief fell from his horse, and in quick succession two of his warriors also went down, while the remaining two turned, in wild alarm, to fly.

But down went a mustang under a fourth shot, and a fifth emptied the saddle of the last Indian rider.

Hardly had the fifth shot been fired when like a flash a horse and rider went by Wild Bill and charged directly upon the Sioux.

It was the Blackfoot girl, and she had her last arrow fitted to her bow, and drawn hard back, as she rode down upon the warrior whose pony the scout had killed.

With a defiant war-cry the Sioux warrior had extricated himself from his fallen horse, and arose to face his foes, a rifle in his grasp.

"Back, girl!" cried Wild Bill, seeing the intention of the brave girl to attack her foe, and starting forward to see if he could get another shot at the warrior.

But, as he called out to her, there came the report of the red-skin's rifle, and Wild Bill saw her reel in her saddle.

But her arrow had left the bow an instant before the crack of the rifle, and with a death-cry upon his lips the warrior fell backward, the dart buried in his breast.

"Bravo, girl! you are a game one," cried Wild Bill, advancing, as the red-skin girl sprung to the ground and quickly secured the scalp of her fallen enemy, and, then turned upon the scout as he advanced, not knowing whether he was to be received by her as friend or foe.

CHAPTER VII.

RED STAR, THE GIRL QUEEN OF THE BLACKFEET.

THE presence of a pale-face in that locality had certainly been a great surprise to the Indian girl, and she had almost fitted her arrow to her bow, to turn it upon Wild Bill, expecting certainly to find but another foe in him, when she discovered him to be the enemy of her pursuers, if not her friend.

His rapid firing, his unerring and deadly aim, added to the fearless manner in which he had faced such tremendous odds, won her admiration, and she had instantly returned to his aid, determined not to fly and leave another to face the peril alone.

When she had secured her red trophy, she turned to face Wild Bill, standing in a half-shy manner, as though not knowing how he would meet her.

But he walked boldly up to her and said, as he seemed to recognize her:

"You are Red Star, the Blackfeet's Girl Queen, are you not?"

"The pale-face chief speaks true."

"I am Red Star," she answered, simply.

"How is it I find the Red Star so far from the village of her people?"

"The Red Star went on the chase and became separated from her braves."

"Then the Sioux warriors saw her, and she would have been taken a captive to their village had not the pale-face chief saved her life."

"But the white chief looks ill, and he is wounded," and she started toward him as Wild Bill tottered with dizziness.

"I am ill, and hurt, too, Red Star; but so are you wounded," and he pointed to a wound upon her shapely arm.

"It is the mark of the Sioux warrior's bullet."

"But come, let the Red Star take the white chief to her people, for they will be his friends now, and the medicine-man of the tribe will care for him."

"I have half a mind to go, girl, for if I stay here I shall die, as I am in a bad way with my head."

"I will catch one of those ponies yonder," and Wild Bill passed his hand continually across his forehead, as though to clear from his brain the clouds that seemed to oppress him.

"The Red Star will catch the ponies."

"Let the white chief wait here," said the Indian girl, speaking in good English.

Mechanically Wild Bill obeyed, and soon the red-skin maiden had caught the four ponies of the Sioux, at the same time quietly taking the scalps of their riders.

"Let the white chief mount, and Red Star will lead the way to her village, which is far away toward the setting sun."

Wild Bill, with an effort, got upon the back of one of the ponies, and mounting her own animal and leading the others, Red Star set off for the village of her tribe.

Before long night came on, and all about them was storm and desolation; but either the Indian girl or her pony held instinctively on the course, and in silence Wild Bill followed.

At length the animal ridden by the scout gave a sudden spring forward, and Red Star saw that he was riderless.

Quickly she dismounted and found Wild Bill lying in a heap in the snow.

But she was not one to desert him in his sickness, and quickly she dragged him to the shelter of a huge bowlder, and in a few minutes had kindled a small fire.

By its light she was enabled to gather logs near by, and soon the fire was blazing cheerily, while in its warmth lay the strong form of the scout tossing in delirium.

With the knife taken from Wild Bill's belt Red Star quickly cut some branches of pine and built for him as good a shelter as she was able, and then she set to work to secure his hands and feet, so that he could neither wander away to perish in the snow, or do injury to himself.

Leaving the Indian ponies hitched to the trees near by, she then mounted her own horse and rode away in the darkness as rapidly as the storm and the depth of the snow would admit.

Groaning and tossing in delirium Wild Bill lay by the blazing fire, vainly striving to free himself from his bonds.

And thus one, two, three hours went by, and the gray dawn came.

But still the snow-storm raged on, still the wounded man raved and writhed in fever.

At last, through the falling flakes, appeared a line of horsemen approaching.

Nearer they came, and were seen to be Indians.

There were a dozen of them in all, and at their head rode Red Star, the Girl Queen of the Blackfeet.

She had changed her pony, however, for a fresh one, and had brought from her village these warriors to aid a pale-face foe.

The fire had burned low, but the heat of fever kept the wounded man from suffering with cold, and his dark-blue eyes were turned upon the red-skins with flashing glances as they came up.

In a few words the Indian girl gave her orders, and two long poles were fastened to a pony, robes were stretched across these, and upon them Wild Bill was placed and bound securely, so that he could not throw himself off.

Then Red Star threw blankets over him, and carrying his rifle and belt of arms herself, the party started on the trail they had come.

It was a desperate struggle for life, for the red-skin girl and her gallant band of braves, to make their way back through that driving storm of snow; but on they pressed, suffering intensely, worn out, and almost despairing, yet with no warrior daring to give up and refuse to follow where a girl led.

At last they reached the summit of a ridge, and the eyes of the devoted band fell upon their village in the valley below.

Adown the steep hillsides they went, and then, amid the wild yells of triumph of their tribe, they reached safety at last, and a welcome was given to the white foe, who had saved their Girl Queen from a cruel captivity, and was even then himself hovering upon the borderland between life and death.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SCOUT'S RETURN.

THE long, dreary winter at Camp Comfort Post was near its ending, and officers and men, miners and idlers, were congratulating themselves that soon the chill winds would give way to balmy breezes, and the flowers and green grass spring up where the snow had been.

To learn if it was safe to venture forth, Colonel Dangerfield Burr had sent Colorado King, the best posted man in those wilds, out upon an inspecting-tour, and after a day spent in the hills, the guide had struck a trail leading to the fort.

Quickly he had followed it, wondering what bold man had ventured to seek the fort while the hills and valleys were yet covered with snow.

It was the trail of a single horse, and as the animal was unshod, Colorado King thought that it might be some daring scout from the Blackfoot or Sioux villages, endeavoring to see if the soldiers at the garrison were preparing to move upon a spring campaign.

It was just twilight when the guide followed the trail up to the log walls of the fort, and seeing that it led on into the fort he knew that it could not be the trail of an Indian.

The sentinel at the gate had just come on duty, so could not tell him who had entered, and putting up his horse Colorado King had sought the colonel's quarters with considerable curiosity to know who was the daring man that had accomplished the perilous journey through the snow-clad hills in safety.

His amazement and horror at the discovery of who it was the reader already knows, and his flight to save his neck from the gallows, when he beheld in the colonel's quarters one whom he believed and hoped was dead, and one whom he well knew could cause him to lose his life at the rope's end.

Seated alone in his comfortable quarters, gazing into the blazing fire of logs, the handsome commandant of Comfort Camp Post was lost in thought.

So deep were his reveries that he failed to hear a step behind him, and started when he beheld a tall form, clad in wolf and bear-skins, standing by his side.

"I fear I startled you, Colonel Burr," said the intruder, quietly.

"Great God! you here, Wild Bill? I believed you in your grave long months ago," cried Colonel Burr, springing to his feet and stretching forth his hand to grasp that of the man before him.

"No, colonel, but it is only by the good luck that usually is my lot, that I am not dead," answered Wild Bill, returning the grasp of the colonel's hand, and throwing aside his panther-skin cap.

"You look hardy and strong, Bill, and I am most happy to welcome you, I assure you, for I have often upbraided myself for allowing you to go into the hills on that scout, when winter was threatening to break upon us at any moment."

"Thank God you are back again in safety," warmly said the officer.

"And thank God that I went, sir; but if you are at leisure I will tell you all."

"Of course I am at leisure, Hickok, and have been for the whole winter, hemmed in here as we have been; but how, in the name of goodness, did you get here?"

"Came on the back of the finest piece of horse-flesh in the West, colonel, and the sentinel, I was afraid, as I rode up, would take me for a bear on horseback and fire at me."

"He would never have hit you had he done so, Bill, for soldiers are desperately bad shots, as you know."

"But I sent Colorado King out this morning, with orders to scout around the fort and see if any of the trails were open, and I expect he will be back to-night, or at any rate, to-morrow."

"Colorado King is at the fort then, sir?" asked Wild Bill.

"Yes, or rather he is off on a scout, as I told you just now."

"And he has been here all the winter, colonel?"

"Yes, for how in the mischief, or rather the snow, could he get away?"

"He was caught out, as it was, in a storm, and came in half dead; but he has a constitution of iron, and would, like you, Bill, laugh at hardships that would kill most men."

"Colonel Burr, I have a secret to tell you about Colorado King," said Wild Bill, leaning his arm upon the mantle and gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

"Your manner indicates that it is something serious, Hickok."

"It is so serious, sir, that of all the evil characters I know upon the plains, there is not one upon whom I could lay a more serious charge than that which I will make against the man known as Colorado King."

"Why, Hickok, you astound me!" said the colonel.

"I never liked Colorado King, sir; but I assure you I was myself astounded at what I discovered him guilty of."

"Pray tell me, Bill, at what you hint."

"I will not hint, Colonel Burr, but tell you frankly that Colorado King, the Guide of the Black Hills, as men call him, is an assassin of men and women."

"Hold, Wild Bill! Be sure you are right before you make so terrible an assertion," said Colonel Burr, warmly.

"I repeat, sir, and weigh well my words, that Colorado King is an assassin of men and women and a robber of his dead victims."

"Great God! can you speak the truth against him, Hickok?" and Colonel Burr sprung to his feet and paced the room excitedly.

"You shall be the judge, sir, when you hear all."

"You remember that I left the post, at your request, to learn if the Indians were going into their winter villages, or were preparing to move south?"

"Yes."

"I discovered that both the Sioux and Blackfeet had gone to their winter villages in the hills, and returning, I was caught in a snow-storm."

"Yes, and I blamed myself for sending you off at the time, and certainly believed that you had been lost and perished, as did all at the post, for Colorado King came in some days later, after suffering fearfully."

"He was fortunate to reach the post, under the circumstances, and few men could have done so."

"The snow-storm I encountered, sir, was at first light, and I cared little for it; but I struck a trail that led further into the hills, and it

looked to me as if a party was lost and were wandering aimlessly about."

"Instantly I determined to follow it, and I came upon two dead bodies that had perished."

"Leaving them unburied, I hastened on to rescue the others, if in my power, and then it was that I beheld a scene which I will remember to my dying day."

Then, in a graphic way, Wild Bill told his story of the scene at Death Camp, and what had followed.

In breathless amazement the officer listened, only once interrupting him, and then to hiss forth:

"Hickok, I will have that man hanged one hour after he returns to this fort."

Then Wild Bill went on to relate his rescue of Red Star, the Girl Queen of the Blackfeet, and how she had in return saved his life, taken him to the village of her people, and placed him under the care of the medicine-chief of the tribe, and how for long weeks he had lingered, but at last recovered his health and strength.

Until the first thaw of the ice in the hills he had remained in the Indian camp, and been treated as their friend, and then, mounted upon a superb black horse, given him by the Red Star's father, the chief of the tribe, he had started upon his return to the fort.

Colonel Burr heard his story with the deepest interest, and then said:

"Hickok, I congratulate you upon your escape from death, and I pledge you my word that Colorado King shall die."

"Orderly!"

At the call of the commandant an orderly appeared at an inner door.

"See if the guide, Colorado King, has returned, and bid him come to me at once."

The orderly saluted and disappeared, but soon returned with the report:

"The guide came back, sir, more than an hour ago, and the sentinel said that he came to your quarters."

"By Heaven! He saw you here, Hickok."

"Where is he now, orderly?"

"He left the fort, sir, half an hour ago."

"Alone?"

"No, sir."

"Hal who went with him?"

"Sluggo Sam, Dead Beat Dick, and four others, sir."

"Do you hear that, Hickok! He has gone with the worst lot of rascals in the camp, and with the start he has will escape me."

"No, Colonel Burr, for I shall start at once, and, as I see by the orderly's coat that it is snowing, I will have no trouble in tracking them, for these are moonlight nights now, and it will be bright enough."

"Bravo for you, Wild Bill! and you shall have all the men you want to accompany you."

"Thank you, sir; and while they are getting ready, I will throw off this skin suit for another, as it is too hot to work in," and Wild Bill hastily departed for his old quarters, to return in half an hour, dressed in his border attire of bunting-jacket, leggings, the bottoms stuck in high cavalry boots, a sombrero, and a heavy cloak thrown over his shoulders.

He had also replaced his Indian-robe saddle for an elegant one of the Mexican pattern, and mounting in haste, rode out of the fort in the blinding storm at the head of a dozen brave troopers.

CHAPTER IX.

TAKING DESPERATE CHANCES.

LED by Wild Bill, the troopers knew that there was work ahead for them to do.

They were well aware that Colorado King was a dangerous man to trifle with.

What wrong he had been guilty of, only Wild Bill and the colonel knew; but they had heard the commandant's last words, which meant much:

"Bring him back alive, Hickok, if possible, for to be shot like a soldier is too good a death for him to die."

Sluggo Sam, Dead Beat Dick, and others of their ilk, who had gone with Colorado King, were also to be feared, especially if brought to bay.

But then, with Wild Bill leading, the troopers had little to fear, and they pressed on hard through the storm and thickening snow.

The moon was at its full, and though the clouds were overcast, there was ample light to follow the broken trail through the snow, but which was being obliterated by the drift and falling flakes.

With unerring skill Wild Bill pressed on, reining his horse back now and then so as not to leave the troopers too far behind.

But one by one the horses of the cavalymen dropped back, the men became benumbed with cold, and the daring scout felt that he would soon be alone on the trail.

To turn back for a larger force and better horses would be to lose the trail altogether, and this it was not the nature of Wild Bill to do.

To force the soldiers to follow him would be to perhaps cause some of them to lose their lives, so he determined to act alone, and let circumstances as they happened master the situation for or against him.

"Lieutenant Lockwood, I think you had better put for the fort with your men, while the trail is well broken and you can follow it, for they have been cooped up in their quarters so long they cannot stand the cold," said Wild Bill.

"They do suffer greatly, Bill, and I do also, though you do not seem to mind it," answered Harry Lockwood, the young officer, shivering as he spoke, yet anxious to press on with the scout.

"Ah! I am accustomed to cold and hardships of the worst kind; but I really feel anxious about the men, so urge that you turn back, sir."

"I will let the sergeant go back with them, while I go on with you, Bill, for I see it is your intention to go it alone."

"There is no man at the post, sir, I would rather have with me than you; but you could not stand the cold three hours longer, warmly clad as you are."

"I would like to try it, Bill," said the plucky young officer.

Bill shook his head and answered:

"I know what it would end in, lieutenant."

"No, sir, return to the fort, and I will press on after Colorado King and his men."

"But, Hickok, great as you are as a fighter, what can you do with seven men?"

"I'll use strategy on them and make them think I have a company of cavalry to back me up."

"You had better find out where they are heading for and return to the fort for aid."

"Well, sir, I'll see," and with a parting grasp of the lieutenant's hand, Wild Bill pressed on alone on the trail, while the half-frozen troopers were glad enough to turn back, well knowing that they were of no use in their benumbed condition and might lose their lives if forced to continue in the pursuit.

Once alone and Wild Bill rode at a more rapid pace, his superb black, like himself, being hardened by exposure, and going through the snow-drifts with little difficulty.

After several hours spent in trailing, Wild Bill came to a thicket of pines, and saw that the trail wound down into a valley.

"I believe that they have hunted cover in the Lost Valley, and if so I can head them off without going round by the valley," he muttered, as he halted upon the trail.

Then, turning away from the track, he urged his horse up the hillside, and soon found a sheltered nook, where he dismounted and secured his horse, wholly out of reach of the sleet-laden winds.

Going on foot for a few hundred yards, he reached a cliff overhanging a canyon, and cautiously glancing over beheld his game.

"I have not time to return to the fort for help, for they will doubtless move early, so I will make myself comfortable until dawn," he muttered, as he retraced his way to where he had left his horse.

Selecting a spot free from snow, and wholly sheltered by rocks, he gathered some wood and soon had a cheerful fire.

Throwing himself down before it on his blankets, he began to think over the best plan of action, and when daylight dawned he had decided upon his course.

It was a desperate undertaking, but Wild Bill had been in just as desperate deeds and escaped, and he would not flinch from carrying out his plan.

Eating his breakfast, and thoroughly warmed by the fire, he mounted his horse and rode down toward the head of the canyon.

There he dismounted and on foot carefully reconnoitered the camp of the band.

He had intended to demand their surrender from the cliff, and shoot down those who refused; but he wished to take Colorado King alive, and he knew that he would not surrender, so, observing the snow-drift, he made up his mind to spring his horse over the cliff, shoot several of the band, and then call upon them to surrender, making them believe that soldiers were covering them with their carbines.

As soon as his mind was made up to this course, he mounted his horse, threw the reins over his neck, and drawing his revolvers beaded at a run directly for the cliff at a point where he knew lay the deep snow-drift below.

Urged by the spurs, the frightened animal went over with a mighty bound, and seeing that he was going to land all right in the snow-drift, Wild Bill began to fire upon the horrified band.

At the first shot Dead Beat Dick fell dead, and a second brought down another of the band, who seemed paralyzed beyond all action by the startling flight of the horse and rider over the cliff.

But down into the snow the animal went, and, maddened with fear, he bounded from it and darted like an arrow down the canyon.

With his revolvers in his hands, and the reins about his neck, it was some time before Wild Bill could draw the animal to a halt, and then the volley of rifle-shots that came flying down the canyon proved to him that the outlaws had recovered from their surprise, and that it would be madness for him to charge back upon them.

"Ah, Black Diamond, you served me a shabby trick that time in running away with me," said

Wild Bill to his horse, as he rode behind a bend in the canyon out of range.

"Now what is to be done?" he asked himself in a way that showed he was in a quandary.

For some moments he sat in silent thought, and then said, half-aloud:

"I don't believe that they can get out of the head of the canyon on horseback, though they may be able to do so."

"I'll just take a look and see."

Leaving his horse in a secluded spot, Wild Bill set off on foot to flank the position of the outlaws and discover what they were about.

Perhaps, if he could gain the cliff, he thought, he might get them under cover of his rifle.

At any rate he would find out.

But through the deep snow, and in the blinding storm, it was serious work to get along, and so he found it, strong and hardened as he was.

At last after two hours of desperate struggling, he gained a point that gave him a view of the head of the canyon.

One glance was sufficient to show him that the canyon was deserted, and that the outlaws had escaped.

CHAPTER X.

A SWIM FOR LIFE

As soon as Wild Bill made the discovery that his game had fled, he sprang from the cliff, over which he had ridden, and landed in the snow-heap where his horse had come down.

There, by the still burning camp-fire, lay two dead bodies, one with a bullet in his brain, the other shot through the heart.

They were Dead Beat Dick and his unfortunate comrade, who had been the victims of the scout's unerring aim while he was in mid-air on his downward flight.

Their pockets had been rifled, and their arms were gone, showing that their companions had no desire to leave anything of value behind, and thought not enough of the dead to even give them a burial in the snow.

To his delight Wild Bill saw that the storm was breaking away, and the sun promised to soon come out with warmth enough to melt the ice.

Following the train of the outlaws to the thicket where their horses had been sheltered, Wild Bill discovered how the escape had been effected.

The side of the canyon was very steep, and some fifty feet in height; but here and there grew stunted trees, and to these lariats had been made fast, and one by one the horses had been half-carried, half-dragged to the top.

"Colorado King evidently expected I had reinforcements below in the canyon, and took the best way to escape."

"Well, he had to work for it, for as good a climber as Black Diamond is, I could not get him up there without the aid of several men."

"Now to strike their trail and see which way they have gone."

With some little difficulty, which demonstrated the hard task the outlaws had had in getting their horses up the hillside, Wild Bill gained the summit and struck off on the trail.

"If they turn to the right at Red Rock, they are making for the Black Hermit's Canyon, and then I can head them off," he said.

A walk of a quarter of a mile, trudging through the now melting snow, brought him to Red Rock, which had received its name on account of its reddish hue.

"To the right they go, and straight to Black Hermit's Canyon," he cried, cheerily, and at once he started upon the back trail.

Regaining his horse, he was soon heading down the canyon, and reaching the valley, turned on a course which he knew would bring him to the point he desired to reach.

But breaking his way through the snow-drifts he soon found was too heavy work for his horse, and that he could not reach Black Hermit Canyon before the outlaws.

So he turned short off to the right, climbed the hills, and soon struck the trail of the band.

"Now, Diamond, you can go along better, after seven horses have broken the way for you, old fellow," said Bill, glad to ease his horse of the terrible work.

As though he appreciated the favor done him, the noble horse pressed on at a swinging pace, but was soon brought to a halt, as his rider caught sight of a second trail joining the one he was following.

"Hello! this comes from the west, where the Buckskin Bravos have their retreat."

"Yes, and it was made by the Buckskin Bravos, and they have united forces with Colorado King."

"This looks bad—"

"Surrender, Wild Bill, or die!"

Loud and clear came the startling summons, and glancing upward, for the sound came from above, Wild Bill beheld a man, seated in a tree, and covering him with a rifle.

Quick as a flash his revolver was drawn and fired; but the reports rung out together as one discharge, but with different results.

At the crack of the rifle Wild Bill's left arm dropped to his side useless, while his shot, sent through the brain of his foe, brought him crashing through the branches down to the ground.

"Hands up, or die!"

"Surrender, Wild Bill!"

"Move, and you are a dead man!"

Such were the cries that rung out here and there from the timber, and Wild Bill knew that he had been caught in a desperate situation.

But he did not hesitate an instant upon his course.

To turn back on the trail he saw would bring him upon foes who had gained his rear.

To go forward would be to confront as many more, and upon his right were others.

There was but one way of escape, and that was to the left.

But then he knew in that direction lay the river, and the spring thaw had doubtless broken up the ice in it.

Still it was his only chance, for, sheltered behind trees, his foes were in every other direction.

Away then to the left he darted like an arrow, his horse bounding through the light snow with terrific leaps.

Shot after shot followed him, yet the bullets flew by without harm, and his noble horse quickly distanced pursuit.

But glancing back, as he neared the river, Wild Bill beheld Colorado King and a dozen others coming on in hot chase.

The allies of the fugitive guide he saw were men of an outlaw band known as the Buckskin Bravos, and who he was aware had their haunts in that locality somewhere.

As he approached the river, to his regret he found it swollen to a torrent, and filled with cakes of ice that dashed furiously along.

Then, to his surprise, he beheld a log cabin upon its banks, and in front of it was a rude boat.

A glance showed him that to escape by the boat was to desert his horse, and this he would not do, though it certainly looked like daring death for both to ride into that ice-filled, foam-ing stream.

But behind him came his foes, stretched out so as to throw a line across the small point upon which he stood and cut him off from escape wholly by that way.

But with the utmost coolness he surveyed his chances, and then, making a sling for his wounded arm, he deliberately rode into the rushing river, with the remark:

"Come, Black Diamond, it's a swim for life, so don't let Death win."

With yells, as they saw his daring act, the pursuers rushed to the cabin, and Colorado King and four others hastily shoved the boat into the stream and sprang in.

Two men quickly seized the four oars, one stood up in the bows to push off the ice with a pole, while Colorado King and another were in the stern, their revolvers in their hands.

As he saw them coming rapidly in chase, Wild Bill quickly wheeled about in his saddle, facing to the rear, while the horse swam boldly on, and raising his revolver fired.

At the shot the man in the bow dropped down and hung over the gunwale, a bullet in his heart.

A second shot toppled over the outlaw in the stern by the side of Colorado King, who at once sprang to his feet and began to fire at Wild Bill, while the wounded man at his feet clutched wildly at his legs in the agonies of death.

"Surrender, Wild Bill!" shouted Colorado King, in a voice hoarse with passion.

But back came the defiant answer.

"Come on and take me, Colorado King, if you like the sport!"

CHAPTER XI.

SAVED FOR REVENGE.

No greater peril could a man hope to surmount than that which surrounded Wild Bill, as his horse swam across the swollen, ice-filled river with his wounded rider upon his back.

But though powerless to use his left arm, in the midst of rushing blocks of ice which threatened to overwhelm his noble horse and himself, with his enemies in a boat coming in hot pursuit, Wild Bill's nerve did not once desert him, nor his indomitable pluck fail him in his hour of dire need.

Raising his revolver he had slain one man, mortally wounded another, and could have killed Colorado King, but refrained from so doing, urged by the very motive which prompted the guide not to send a bullet through his enemy's heart, and which motive was the hope of a more befitting revenge.

But Colorado King trifled too long, believing that he must certainly overtake Wild Bill in the river, and thus have him at his mercy, for the scout's next shot caused one of the oarsmen to throw up his arms with a loud cry of pain, and the other ceased rowing and threw himself down in the bottom of the boat for shelter from an aim that had proven so deadly.

"Seize your oars, you coward!" shouted Colorado King, frenzied at the act of the man which left the boat at the mercy of the current.

But the man feared Wild Bill more than he did Colorado King, and said, sullenly:

"Take 'em yerself, ef yer wants ter, fer I hain't goin' ter be shot down like a dog."

"By Heaven, but die like a dog you shall," cried Colorado King, and, quick as a flash, he turned his revolver upon the prostrate man and fired several times in rapid succession down into his body.

A shriek for mercy and a groan of pain mingled were heard by the outlaws upon the shore, and also reached the ears of Wild Bill, who uttered a mocking laugh and cried:

"That's right, Colorado King, fight it out among yourselves."

In a perfect fury the guide turned once more to the scout, and a curse broke from his lips as he saw that his enemy was escaping him, for the splendid black was near the other shore, while the boat was carried swiftly away with the current.

Maddened by the sight, Colorado King emptied his revolver, and then seized those of his comrades, and kept up a rattling fire upon the daring scout.

But the distance was too great and the bullets did no harm, while Wild Bill, under a volley of rifles from the Buckskin Bravos upon the other shore gained the bank, and rode out into the shelter of the heavy timber.

Dismounting from his tired horse he led him to the cover of some large trees, and then ran down to the shore, well knowing that the rifle he carried would kill double the distance of those he would have to face.

The crowd of Buckskin Bravos upon the shore seemed to realize this fact also, for they scattered to cover very quickly, followed by a jeering laugh from Wild Bill, who would not fire upon them, but turned his gaze upon the boat.

A glance showed him that Colorado King had taken a pair of oars himself, and was pulling for the shore, aided by the man who had been wounded at his post, and who now sat in the stern, guiding the clumsy scow with one hand, the other hanging helpless by his side.

"Ho, Colorado King," shouted Wild Bill, in a voice that rung like a trumpet.

"Curse you, Wild Bill! I'll be quits for this," came back the answer in a voice that quivered with passion.

"All right, it is war to the bitter end between us," shouted Wild Bill, and he raised his rifle to his shoulder and all expected to see the flash and hear the report that would end the days of Colorado King.

But the guide did not flinch, although he, too, expected a shot and well knew Wild Bill's deadly aim.

With a fearless face, nerved to meet the worst, he looked calmly at Wild Bill, and never once faltered in his strong, even strokes for the shore.

"Look out, pard!"

The cry came from half a score of voices on the shore, but Colorado King gazed calmly at the man who he knew could kill him.

Then Wild Bill lowered his rifle, and again raised it; but as before his enemy did not waver.

Again, as though thinking better of his intention, Wild Bill lowered his rifle, which he had supported upon the elbow of his wounded arm, and called out:

"You are a game one, Colorado King; but I'll not shoot you, as I have promised myself the pleasure of hanging you."

With these words he wheeled on his heel and strode back into the timber, when, mounting his horse, he rode away, leaving Colorado King amazed that his life had been spared, for that Wild Bill would have missed him he had not the remotest idea.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAILERS.

WHEN Lieutenant Harry Lockwood returned to the post, and made his report, Colonel Burr could not but think that Wild Bill had done right in sending the troopers back, as some of the men were unable to dismount, so benumbed were they with cold.

"The scout was right, Lockwood, for the men have been cooped up for months and would soon have perished."

"But I fear for Hickok, going on alone as he has," said the colonel.

"I am perfectly willing, Colonel Burr, to call for volunteers, among the scouts and hunters, and follow him, if you say so, sir."

"A good idea, Lockwood, and you can do so, only do not be rash, and if you find the weather too much for your men and the horses, turn back while you can."

The gallant lieutenant at once went to seek the rest he so much needed; but at dawn he was up, and having secured a score of volunteers set out upon the trail he had been forced to desert the night before.

The snow had not been so heavy as to obliterate the tracks, and they pressed on in Wild Bill's trail, after passing the spot where he had separated from the troopers.

After following it for some time they came to the thicket where he had encamped, and soon after the scout who was leading drew rein almost upon the brink of the cliff.

"Well, Bludso, have you lost the trail?" called out Harry Lockwood, riding to the front.

"No, loot'nent, but I doesn't intend to foller it whar it goes," and the scout pointed down over the cliff.

"Great Heavens! Wild Bill rode over there in the darkness!" cried the lieutenant, and all now were halted and gazing down into the canyon.

"Yes, loot'nent, Bill jumped his horse over thar, an' no mistake, for thar is whar he 'lighted; but it wasn't done in ther dark, an' it was done on purpose."

"On purpose and in daylight, Bludso?"

"Yes, sir; for you see thar was very little snow fell after these tracks was made, an' it quit fallin' some time after daybreak."

"That at least shows he rode over by daylight, Bludso, according to your argument."

"Yes, loot'nent, and there are his foot-tracks to show that he scouted 'round first, and then rode over."

"Do you mean that Wild Bill, reckless as he is, deliberately rode his horse over this cliff, Bludso?"

"He didn't do it deliberate, sir, but went over with a rush, as ther trail shows; but he did it, and it was to surprise the gang that was around that fire below."

"That snow-heap let his horse down light, and I guess he surprised the boys a leetle."

"Thar, you see he rode on straight down ther canyon, an' if you look closer under them bushes you will see two stiffs."

"Two dead men are there, as I live!" exclaimed the officer.

"Yes, sir; and there may be more of 'em, for Bill works like a whirlwind when he gets to going."

"Well, we can see what was done in a very short while."

"Get to work, men, and see what discoveries you can make," ordered the lieutenant.

In a short while, to men who could read the signs before them as an open book, they got pretty near the truth of the affair, and the party started upon Wild Bill's trail down the canyon, the horses having been led around to where they could join it, for no one cared to take the leap, mounted, over the cliff.

As they rode along they discussed the daring feat of Wild Bill, and Bludso, the scout, had just said that matters were narrowing down, as the trail led into a bend in the river, when he drew rein suddenly, as before him, but a few paces, lay a dead body all in a heap.

"Loot'nent, Wild Bill has been in business here ag'in," he said.

"So it seems, Bludso; but that is not one of Colorado King's men."

"No, sir; that is one of ther outlaw band that gave ther trains such trouble last fall."

"What! the Buckskin Bravos, as they were called?"

"Yes, sir; and he was layin' fer Bill up in that tree, for there is his hat up there now on that limb, and he took a tumble."

"You think it was Wild Bill that killed him?"

"Sure; for there goes the trail of his horse off thar toward the river, and it seems that he must have got into a hornets' nest, from the tracks I sees about."

Straight to the river then they followed the trail of Wild Bill, but halted upon discovering the cabin.

"That's been builded since I was here last fall."

"Guess ther Buckskin Bravos has wintered there, and we must go slow, fer ther tracks shows, loot'nent, thar is a nest of 'em ter tackle."

"And you think Colorado King has joined forces with the Bravos?"

"It looks so, sir."

"And Wild Bill?"

"His trail leads to the river, and he was in a hurry."

"Surely he would not dare attempt to cross it, surging as it is, and filled with floating ice?"

"He are ther man to do it, if he tuk ther notion, loot'nent, and he did it, too, for thar leads his trail right into ther stream," and Bludso made the last assertion with considerable excitement.

"And the Bravos did not follow him, Bludso?"

"Not on horseback, sir; but now let us see what are in ther cabin, and if ther Buckskin Bravos are there some of us will wish we hadn't come, or hed said our prayer afore we did come."

"You think they will fight us?"

"Sure!"

"Then, charge!"

With the words upon his lips, the young officer drew his revolver and spurred toward the cabin, followed by his men with a cheer. But no shots greeted them, as they had expected, and all about the cabin was silence and desolation, though there was every indication that it had been but recently occupied.

A number of bunks were against the rear wall, several rude tables stood here and there, and a fire still burned in the large chimney-place; but the occupants had gone, and their tracks led down to the river.

Here and there were red stains upon the white

snow, and this proved that some one had been wounded.

That the outlaws had a boat was evident, for a broken oar was found upon the bank, and the imprint of where the rude craft had been hauled out on shore still remained.

But whether Wild Bill was dead, a prisoner, or had escaped, there was no possible means of knowing, and reluctantly Lieutenant Lockwood gave the order to return to the post.

Back along the weary snow-trail they went, and were nearing the fort when suddenly they saw a man come over the ridge of a hill in their advance.

"Wild Bill!"

A chorus of voices shouted the name, and the jaded horses were spurred toward him.

With a face pale and haggard from suffering, and yet fearless and defiant, his arm in a sling, and his horse with drooping head, Wild Bill awaited the approach of the party.

"Ho, Bill, right glad am I to grasp your hand once more," cried Harry Lockwood, as he halted by the side of the scout.

"Thank you, lieutenant; but which way are you from?"

"We have been on the hunt for you, Bill."

"Well, you have found me."

"And you are wounded and suffering, so let us hasten back to the post."

"I am not just now in the best of health, lieutenant, for I got shot in my arm which pains me, and neither Black Diamond nor myself have had a happy time since we left you last night," said Wild Bill with a grim smile, and he then went on to tell of his thrilling adventures as they rode on to the post together.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FOILED OUTLAW.

"WELL, doctor, is the bone broken?"

The question was addressed by Wild Bill, as he sat in Colonel Burr's head-quarters, to the surgeon of the post, who, was examining the wound in his arm.

"No, Bill, but the bullet carried in with it a piece of your jacket-sleeve, and that is what has made the wound so painful!"

"Then it will not lay him up, Bennett?" asked Colonel Burr, who stood by.

"No, colonel, not longer than a few weeks."

"Bah! if the bone is all right I do not care and will be as good as new in a few days," said Wild Bill, light'ing a cigar and coolly watching the surgeon as he dressed his wound.

"Now, Hickok, what is your idea in regard to Colorado King's intentions," asked the colonel, as he forced the scout into an easy-chair near the fire, and took a seat near him.

"Well, sir, my idea is that he will make for the Black Hills to get the gold he left there."

"But which he will not find?"

"Not unless he saw me hide it on my way here from the Indian village."

"Good! it was thoughtful of you to think of hiding it."

"Oh, I knew that he would go there after it as soon as he dared risk the trip through the mountains, and I took the chances, and big ones, too, to get there first."

"And you think he will go there as soon as the thaw comes, now that he is aware that he will be hanged if I catch him?"

"Yes, sir, he will seek the gold, and finding it gone, will take the one course left for him."

"And what is that?"

"Return and join the Buckskin Bravos, and doubtless become their chief."

"He is just the man to do that."

"Yes, sir, for he knows miners will be going into the hills as soon as the winter breaks up, and he will hang upon the trails and rob the trains going out and coming in."

"Yes, that is what the Buckskin Bravos were at last fall, and they certainly were successful in some cases."

"They had no leader of nerve, sir, or they would have gotten rich; but with Colorado King as their chief they'll do well unless they are hunted down."

"And how to hunt them down is the question, Hickok."

"There is but one way, sir."

"And what way is that?"

"I will go off on a scout alone, find their retreat, and then lead a band against them with your consent."

"Certainly, Bill, but you may get caught by them, and Colorado King would be merciless to you, as you know."

Wild Bill smiled and said in his quiet way:

"Colonel, I do not think that Colorado King will start for the Black Hills for some days, perhaps not for a couple of weeks, when the snow will have melted a great deal."

"Then, when he does start, he will not carry more than one or two men with him to help him, and I intend to follow upon his trail."

"You?"

"Yes, colonel, and if possible I will take him alive and bring him to you for further reference."

The colonel laughed, and said:

"And I shall refer him to the hangman, Bill; but are you able to start on such a jaunt?"

"I will be, sir, in a very few days," was the confident answer.

But yet it was nearly two weeks before the surgeon would give his consent that Wild Bill should leave the post, and then he told him that his wound was not sufficiently healed for him to go.

"Never mind, doctor, it will heal as I go along, just as fast as it would if I sat still here and smoked the colonel's fine cigars," answered Bill, as he mounted Black Diamond and rode out of the fort upon his perilous mission.

As he noticed how readily a trail could be followed, in the condition the ground was then in, being half snow and slush, Wild Bill determined to head at once for the Black Hills and visit the Death Camp.

"Then I'll see if he has been there or not, and if he has, I can easily trail him back to the retreat of the Buckskin Bravos," he said, as he turned the head of his horse toward the Black Hills.

It was a long and a hard ride for both horse and master; but without adventure he rode upon the scene of the Death Camp one night just after dark had set in.

It was impossible for him to see then whether there were any fresh trails about, so he went into camp for the night, fed his horse with the feed he had brought with him, and building a fire cooked his supper, eating it with the relish of a man who was hungry, at peace with the whole world and had nothing to fear.

With the first streaks of dawn in the east he sprung to his feet and his first glance was upon the scene of the death-camp.

The snow had but partially melted here and there, and the bodies of the dead still lay where they had fallen.

But here, there, everywhere about the spot, were tracks of horses and men.

"By Heaven! he has been here before me!" cried Wild Bill.

Then he examined the trails closely and muttered:

"Three men and three horses; I thought he would neither come alone, or bring many with him."

"Had he found the gold, those two men with him would never have gotten back in safety."

"Oh, no! he is not the man to divide his treasure with any one, when a knife-thrust or pistol-shot will save all to himself."

"Well, he did not find the gold, that is certain, and, not knowing how I escaped, when he believed me dead, he doubtless believes I carried it off with me, so, as soon as I have avenged the mother, I will come and get the daughter's inheritance and carry it to her."

"Now to do a duty I owe these poor dead."

Finding a suitable spot not far away, Wild Bill set to work digging two graves.

Into the smaller one he placed the body of Mrs. Courtney, with the remark:

"I'll bury her alone, for some day, if this country opens up, as I believe it will to settlers, the poor girl may wish to come here and see her mother's grave."

Into the other grave he placed the bodies of Mrs. Courtney's companions, and then mounting his horse set off on the trail left by the three horses.

Camping at night on the trail he pushed on once more at early dawn, the way leading just as he had expected into the fastnesses of the Hills, where he knew the Buckskin Bravos must have retreated after leaving the cabin the day he swam the river.

There was now every indication that the winter had gone, the winds had lost their cutting chill, the melting snow and ice sent the torrents booming along, and the grass and trees began to wear the emerald hue of spring.

Here and there the trail he followed would lead to the bank of some small stream where it crossed; but the rivulet had changed to a torrent, and Wild Bill several times had to go far out of his way to cross, and then seek the spot upon the other shore to take up the broken thread he had been following.

This delayed him so that he felt that he must be three or four days behind those he followed.

But the trail was plainly marked, excepting where rising waters had destroyed it, and he was determined to follow it to the end, so that he could discover the exact retreat of the Buckskin Bravos and be able to lead a force against them.

At last the trail brought him just at sunset to a deep ravine, through the bottom of which the waters went foaming along like a mill-race in a freshet.

But this was not what caused Wild Bill to suddenly rein his horse back, into the shelter of a thicket of dwarf trees, but the sight of a horseman coming slowly toward him, yet upon the opposite bank of the ravine.

"Black Diamond, we are going to have company," said the scout, as he hid his horse in the thicket, and dismounting, unsling his rifle ready for use.

CHAPTER XIV.

A BUCKSKIN BRAVO'S CONFESSION.

ALMOST simultaneously the eyes of Wild Bill had fallen upon two objects to rivet his atten-

tion, as he rode out of the thicket upon the bleak bank of the ravine.

The one was that the chasm was spanned by a bridge, and the other was the approaching horseman upon the other bank.

Peering out of the thicket the scout was glad to discover, by the indifferent manner in which the horseman rode along, that he had not detected his presence in the vicinity, and as the trail led across the bridge and then toward the thicket, he did not doubt but that he would soon have the outlaw in under the muzzle of his revolver, for his buckskin hunting-coat, leggings and slouch hat proved that he was one of the band of Bravos.

A glance at the bridge showed Wild Bill that it looked like a very frail affair, for it was a footing of poles a yard long, tied with rawhide upon four stout cables, the ends of which were made fast to trees upon either shore.

Lines stretched forth from the center upon the sides to trees upon the banks, to prevent the bridge from swinging like a pendulum under the motions of any one crossing; but altogether it was a structure which only one with a perfect nerve would care to cross.

The horseman, as he approached the swinging bridge, did not hesitate, however, but held straight on to the frail-looking footing, and came safely over to the other side, turning, as Wild Bill had expected and hoped that he would, toward the thicket where he little dreamed that a foe lay hidden.

A moment after the Buckskin Bravo reined back his horse with a cry of alarm, and attempted to draw a revolver; but a firm grip was upon his bit and a revolver pointed up into his face, as Wild Bill said, calmly:

"Pard Buckskin, I want you!"

"Who are yer?" asked the man as pale as death.

"Have you ever heard of Wild Bill?"

"Sure; heard more of him than I wanted to."

"Well, now he has the honor of your acquaintance."

"No! are you ther man they calls the Whirlwind?"

"I am Wild Bill Hickok, and if you have heard of me you know that I will stand no trifling."

"Oh! I have heard of you, and how you swam the river full of ice, and laid out ther party in ther boat."

"I wasn't thar, for my lay-out are up here in ther Hills; but your name goes round the camp-fires at night."

"But what in thunder do you want with me?"

"You shall soon know, I assure you."

"I am in a leetle of a hurry jist now."

"Then answer my questions, and tell no lies."

"Who are you?"

"They calls me Poker Dan in camp."

"You belong to the band known as the Buckskin Bravos?"

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"Waal, what if I do?"

"You are just from your stronghold in the Hills?"

"Granted."

"Is Colorado King there?"

"Yes."

"Is he your chief?"

"Yes, we calls him King of the Bravos."

"A good name for him."

"Yes, he'll be king or nothing."

"How many are there in the band?"

"More'n you'd better tackle, if you are Wild Bill, ther Whirlwind."

The scout smiled, and asked:

"Has not your chief just returned from a trail up in the Gold Hills?"

"Yes, he's been off for some days."

"With two comrades?"

"Yes, two of the boys were with him."

"And they got back when?"

"Yesterday."

Seeing that the outlaw was constantly glancing in the direction he had come, as though expecting some one, Wild Bill asked:

"Who are you looking for?"

"No one."

"Answer me! Is there any one you expect to follow you?"

The man was silent, but the finger on the revolver pointing into his face seemed to press harder upon the trigger, and he said, quickly:

"Yes, I'm expecting some one."

"Who?"

"The king and two of the boys."

"Ah! where is he going?"

"I do not know."

"You must!"

"Waal, he said as he was disapp'inted in findin' some gold-dust up in ther Hills he went arter, he would jist skip off to ther States an' capture a rich gal whom her dying mother had left to his charge."

Wild Bill started at this, for it sounded strangely as though Colorado King, disappointed in getting the gold he had killed Mrs. Courtney to obtain, and knowing that her daughter possessed riches, sent her by her parents from the mines, intended to get the girl into his power to force from her what money she had.

"Did he say where he was going?" asked the scout, quietly.

"To Chicago."

"Do you know the girl's name?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Yes."

"When was Colorado King to return?"

"He said he could get back by the time the snow got out of the Hills."

"And when does he start?"

"He'll be along soon, for I rode on ahead to see if we could cross Rocky Run, or would have to go round by Black Hermit Canyon."

"Well, pard, I'll entertain you until your comrades come, so dismount, and remember, no sly work, or I will end your days right here."

The outlaw was a man of a philosophical turn of mind, and having got into a scrape that looked bad for him, determined to make the best of it.

With a man different from Wild Bill, he might not have been so passive; but there was no mining-camp, post, fort, or border town in which the fame of the scout had not spread, and the most marvelous stories were told of his deadly aim, desperate daring and giant strength, so that he was one to avoid a personal encounter with under all circumstances.

Thus deciding, the Buckskin Bravo allowed himself to be quietly disarmed and securely bound to a tree, while a gag, hastily manufactured, was thrust into his mouth.

Having thus secured his prisoner, Wild Bill set about his preparations to greet Colorado King and those with him, and he made up his mind to take the chief alive, or kill him then and there.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MEETING ON THE BRIDGE.

It was just sunset as Wild Bill completed the task of securing the outlaw in the thicket, and he cast somewhat anxious glances in the direction from whence he expected Colorado King and his comrades.

Not on his own account was he anxious, as he was accustomed to taking odds; but he was fearful lest some accident might prevent the coming of the man, whom he knew to have been for a long time the secret leader of the Buckskin Bravos.

Certain knowledge of the movements of troops meant to be kept secret had leaked out the past summer in some mysterious way, and Wild Bill had then felt that there was a spy in camp.

Trains to the Hills, and from them, had also been attacked by supposed bands of Indians; but, to a skilled borderman such as Wild Bill was, the truth revealed itself, upon visiting the scenes of robbery, that red-painted faces did not always hide red skins.

That white men in Indian toggery and paint were the robbers he did not doubt; but then he had not believed that any of the men could be found dwellers at the post, and laid the charge against the band of road-agents that had sprung up under the name of the Buckskin Bravos.

Having now found out that Colorado King was the leader of the Bravos, and was then on his way to play a game of wrong and robbery against the daughter of the woman he had slain, Wild Bill was most anxious to get him into his power.

"I would like to see him hang, and will take him alive if I can," he muttered. "But, rather than have him escape, I'll end his career right here."

Once he had killed or captured Colorado King and his comrades, Wild Bill made up his mind to force his bound prisoner in the thicket to guide him as near the retreat as he dared go, and then return with all haste to the post to get a squad of troopers to follow him to surprise the Buckskin Bravos in their camp.

"Once I have broken up that gang, I will be at leisure to go to Chicago, and keep my pledge to that poor woman who died in the Hills, and give the girl her inheritance."

"I did intend to go on a gold-hunt myself this summer, but I must do my duty to the orphan girl first," he generously said.

Going down to the bridge, his faithful horse following him as a dog would have done, he said:

"Come, Diamond, let me see if you are afraid of this trapeze business."

With this he led the animal upon the bridge, the noble beast seeming to feel no fear where his master went before.

The bridge was nearly eighty feet in length, and not more than a yard in width, while, in spite of the steadying lines, it would sway and swing to an alarming extent to one poised at that dizzy height above a fearful chasm.

But both horse and master looked down into the depths below without a tremor.

Already had twilight fallen, and objects at a distance were becoming misty; but with the dying of the daylight the moon shed a silvery glow upon the scene, causing the foaming torrent far below to sparkle like showers of diamonds.

Not wishing to go forward, as he feared the outlaws might appear in sight and see him, and

dreading to attempt to back his horse off the narrow bridge, Wild Bill allowed the obedient animal to stand there, some paces from the bank, while he cautiously slipped by him and took his stand at the base of a tree, the shadow of whose branches, cast by the moon, fell upon Black Diamond and hid him in partial gloom.

Thus the scout waited, his rifle in hand, while dark clouds rolled up from the west, threatening a storm, and alternately casting the scene in shadow and moonlight.

"If that fellow has deceived me he'll regret it," said Wild Bill, as the time passed on and the expected outlaws did not appear.

But hardly had he spoken the words, when the moon shot out from behind a cloud and gleamed for an instant upon some bright object in the distance.

"Somebody is coming, Diamond," said the scout in a low tone, and at once he stepped upon the bridge, rifle in hand.

Going close up to the heels of his horse, he stood there peering into the gloom beyond the other shore.

Then again came an instant of moonlight, and Wild Bill detected three horsemen approaching in Indian file.

"Keep quiet as a panther now, Black Diamond, for we are about to jump our game," he said softly to his horse, at the same time running his rifle forward and leveling it along the animal's back.

As they neared the bridge the leading horseman suddenly broke forth in song, singing an old ballad in a fine barytone, which caused the scout to mutter:

"You've got a fine voice, Colorado King; but the rope will soon choke it off, I'm thinking."

Arriving at the bridge the horse ridden by the chief shied away from it quickly; but a volley of curses and the application of the spurs forced him upon the frail footing, and he came trembling forward.

Taken up with the dangerous work they had to accomplish, none of the three men cast a glance ahead, so failed to see the shadowy outline of a horse already upon the bridge.

But when they were about half-way across, the moon suddenly burst out from under a cloud, and their eyes fell upon the startling sight, and Colorado King drew rein in horror, while his example was at once followed by his two comrades coming close upon his heels.

But more startling still were the cool, threatening words, backed up by a rifle covering their hearts:

"Colorado King, this bridge is not wide enough for us to pass each other, so up with your hands, all of you, or jump into the depths below!"

CHAPTER XVI. INTO THE DEPTHS.

COLORADO KING was a man who acted promptly in danger, and like a flash the knowledge came into his mind that he was doomed to sure death unless he took big chances for life.

The horse appearing upon the bridge before him had been like an apparition, but the moon, as it sailed out from beneath a cloud, showed him that a man stood behind that horse, and had his eye running along the sights of a rifle.

Who that man was his voice told him, and that not one atom of mercy could be expected at his hands he was well aware.

Under some circumstances, he might have been willing to have surrendered and run the risk of escaping.

But with Wild Bill as his captor he knew the hope was fruitless.

Having been foiled in finding the gold where he had left it, he had made up his mind to go to Chicago and see what he could force from the daughter of the woman who had discarded him long years before, and upon whom he had visited a terrible vengeance.

Wild Bill had thwarted him in getting the gold, and now he stood in his pathway to bar his evil designs upon Clarice Courtney.

All these thoughts went like lightning-flashes through his brain, and then he glanced down into the dark depths beneath him.

To surrender was death at the rope's end.

To spring into the torrent below was seemingly certain death, yet there was still a chance in a thousand for life, and if he lived, then he might gain his end against Clarice Courtney, and certainly he could avenge himself upon Wild Bill.

Having thus decided, he released his feet from his stirrups, and unfastened his belt of arms, to lighten his weight.

"Quick! what answer, Colorado King?"

"Do you surrender, or take the leap?" came in the stern voice of Wild Bill.

"I take the leap, Wild Bill!"

The voice rung out clear and startling in the night-air, and then down shot a dark object from the bridge, to disappear in the gloom of the depths below.

Even Wild Bill was taken aback at this sudden and unexpected act, for he had believed that Colorado King would surrender, while the two Braves reeled in their saddles with faintness, as they saw their leader spring from his saddle into mid-air.

Snorting wildly, the riderless steed stood trembling with fright where his master had deserted him, and noticing that all the animals, even to Black Diamond, were getting restless, Wild Bill saw that he must act promptly.

He certainly could not get his own horse off of the bridge with those two armed foes so near him, and what he did he was well aware must be done with dispatch.

"Do you surrender, or follow your chief?" he called out, sternly, keeping his rifle at a level, while he with one hand patted Black Diamond on the haunch to quiet him.

"You follow the chief!" was the response of the man in the rear, and with his words came the flash and report of the revolver he had hastily drawn from his belt.

The bullet cut its way through the crown of Wild Bill's hat, and the report caused the already nervous horse to give a start that made the bridge sway alarmingly.

But, knowing that the climax was reached, come what might, Wild Bill followed the shot of the outlaw a second after with one from his rifle, and a wild shriek burst from the man's lips, his arms waved wildly, and clutching at the mane of his horse as he fell, he dragged the animal to one side, his hoof went off the edge, and with a cry almost human in its agony, the steed followed his master in the flight below.

Wildly the three remaining horses snorted, Black Diamond now losing his nerve also, and it certainly looked as though all must be dashed to eternity; but stern and calm were the words of the scout:

"Do you surrender, Buckskin?"

"Yes, oh, yes! see! my hands are up!"

"For God's sake do not kill me!"

The cry was pitiful in its pleading, and Wild Bill called out quickly:

"All right, my man; throw your belt of arms away."

"I'll do it," was the eager response, and the command was hastily obeyed.

"Now, Diamond, steady, old boy, for there is no danger."

"Be cool, old fellow," said Wild Bill, soothingly, and slinging his rifle to his back, he began to soothe his frightened horse, and at the same time call to him to back slowly.

Each foot was gingerly put down by the intelligent animal, and when the hoof went too near the edge of the bridge, Wild Bill would grasp it and place it in a safer spot, all the time speaking soothingly to the horse and gaining his perfect confidence.

All this time, until Black Diamond was on terra firma, the outlaw sat trembling upon his horse, with the riderless steed of Colorado King in his front, and both of the beasts shivering with terror.

Finding Black Diamond safe, Wild Bill stepped again upon the bridge, and after some coaxing, led the horse of Colorado King to the bank, the other animal following slowly, his unnerved rider clinging to him, an object of pity from his terrible fright.

"Now, my man, you are my prisoner, and I want no funny business, or you'll go over that cliff," sternly said the scout, dragging the outlaw from his saddle.

"I'll do all you say, Bill, for I know what you are when you get started," was the whining response of the trembling wretch.

Wild Bill glanced into his face and said quickly, as he recognized him:

"What! you turned outlaw, Nick Nesbit?"

"Bill, I couldn't help it, for ill-luck was on all I did, and I couldn't make a dollar, and there's a girl out East I promised to marry in five years."

"So you took to stealing gold to take back with you to support her on?"

"Yes, Bill, I had to do something, or go back poor."

"Better go back poor than cut throats to get gold, Nick Nesbit."

"I am sorry for you; but as I don't think you are bad at heart, I'll give you a chance for your life, instead of a fellow I have got over in the brush yonder."

"You are awful good, Bill."

"You need not thank me until you find out what you have to thank me for."

"Yes, Bill."

"You are a member of the Buckskin Braves?"

"Yes."

"You know their secret retreat?"

"Yes, Bill."

"Take me there, and when we return to the post you will be free to go your way, provided you leave out of the Hills."

"If you do not, and I catch you again, I'll kill you."

"I'll go, Bill, and glad enough; but you run big risks in going to the retreat."

"I am taking the risks, not you, Nick Nesbit, so just mount your horse and lead on."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GHOST OF THE CANYON.

IN obedience to the order of Wild Bill, the outlaw, Nick Nesbit, took the rein of his horse and turned toward the bridge.

"Why do you not ride, sir?" asked Wild Bill, throwing himself into his own saddle.

"Bill, I is too beat out with scare to ride across here, for I haven't gotten my nerves back yet, and it don't seem as though I could walk over even."

"All right, crawl over, if you like it best, so that you get to the other side," said Wild Bill, with a light laugh.

A gleam of triumph crossed the face of the outlaw at this, though the scout did not see it, and, with another remark about his fears he knelt down and really began to crawl on hands and knees over the bridge, his horse following slowly behind, while Wild Bill jeered him on account of his fright.

"My nerves are very shaky, Bill, and my legs wouldn't support me if I did stand up," said the outlaw.

"Your tongue seems all right, though, Nick."

The man made no reply, but suddenly dropped flat down upon his face, clutching around the flooring of the bridge for protection.

"Fool! what is the matter with you?" cried the scout, with anger.

"It seemed that the bridge was breaking, Bill," whined the man.

"It certainly will not break with two when it held four horsemen awhile since."

"Get up and move on, or I'll ride over you."

Thus urged the outlaw arose to his feet and walked on, though several times he cried out with alarm.

Arriving in safety upon the other side he mounted, and riding closely to the scout's side, led the way along a trail branching away from the ravine.

"How far is the retreat?" asked Wild Bill.

"A mile."

"Right in the heart of the mountains, is it not?"

"It's in a canyon in the Hills, Bill."

"How is it guarded?"

"There are sentinels at the entrance."

"How many?"

"Two men stay there at night, but they take turns in watching."

"How many are in the band?"

"There are a dozen in camp, now that you've killed the captain and Bob Bawls, and have got me and the fellow you said you had over in the thicker."

"But, Bill, I do hate to go alone here at night."

"Why, is the trail a dangerous one to travel?"

"It is."

"And for what reason?"

"Do you believe in ghosts, Bill?" asked the man, in a whisper.

"No, I am no such fool."

"Bill, don't talk that way, for there is a ghost in these Hills."

"Nonsense."

"No, it hain't nonsense, but real fact, for all of us have seen the ghost."

"All of the band?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a ghost is it?"

"A man's ghost."

"Bah!"

"It is so, Bill, for they do say that a miner was murdered up in these Hills some time ago, and that he haunts the canyon ever since to frighten off those who would find his gold, for the murderers did not get it."

"Well, Nick, he'll not frighten me, as it is the living not the dead that I fear."

"Well, Bill, we have to pass through the canyon, and we shall be sure to see it, for they say that it shows itself to all who ride by night."

"All right, Nick, I'll see what effect a shot has upon it."

"Bill, for God's sake, don't shoot a ghost!" cried Nick Nesbit, in alarm.

"I'll shoot ghost, goblin or devil that crosses my path, Nick."

"You'll die if you do."

"I may die suddenly if I don't; but have you ever seen this ghost, Nick?"

"No; for I would not ride out by night, and when I went along with the chief an hour ago it was too early for the ghost to walk."

"Well, this is just the time for him, and I hope we'll find him prowling around," and Wild Bill seemed rather pleased at the thought of encountering a ghost.

The way led through wild fastnesses for half a mile, and then the outlaw turned into a canyon so narrow and deep that it was very dark within.

But after awhile there was a break in the canyon's high walls of rock overhung with trees, and the moonlight streamed down upon the trail for a short space.

"Good God, Bill, there's the ghost!"

With the words, the outlaw suddenly wheeled his horse to the right-about, drove his spurs deep into the flanks of his horse, and away the animal bounded the way they had come.

Wild Bill made a quick grasp at the reins, but missed them, and then drawing a revolver, called out sternly:

"Halt, Nick Nesbit, or I will shoot you down!"

"No! no! no! Bill! See! the ghost! the ghost!"

The outlaw shouted back the words in tones of horror, as he disappeared in the gloom of the canyon, urging his horse at full speed.

But raising his revolver, Wild Bill fired quickly.

There was a shriek, a heavy fall, and the scout knew that he had brought down the horse of the outlaw, whatever had happened to the rider.

Then he turned his gaze ahead of him once more, for, with the quick words of the outlaw he had seen before him a shadowy form glide into the canyon from the shadows of the cliff upon the right of the trail.

And there that weird form still stood, silent, appearing like a specter surely, and with one hand pointing toward the scout.

With the utmost coolness, as he saw that the apparition had not been alarmed by the shot and showed no desire to glide away, the scout sat upon his horse, gazing at the weird form until silence became oppressive.

Then Wild Bill called out in a voice that rung like a trumpet:

"Ghost or mortal, up with those weird-looking hands, or I'll send a bullet searching for your heart!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GHOST TALKS.

In answer to the command of Wild Bill, and the ominous click of the revolver, distinctly heard in the deathlike silence of the canyon, the arms of the white-robed form went up above its head with an alacrity that a driver of an overland stage might have shown when halted by road-agents.

"Ah! you understand English, Mr. Ghost, I see," said Wild Bill, riding forward, his revolver covering the shrouded form which certainly did look most ghostly, standing there in the moonlight and in that lonely canyon.

Riding straight up to the apparition Wild Bill halted, and was surprised with the words:

"You are Wild Bill?"

"Yes, so I am called, ghostie!" was the cool reply.

"I recognized your form and voice, or I would have risked a shot from any other man."

"You flatter me, Pard of the Tomb; but who are you?"

"One who owes his life to you."

"Indeed, no, you owe it to yourself for obeying orders so promptly to throw up your fists."

"No, I owe you my life on a former occasion, when you risked your own to save me."

"I am Duff Scott."

"Ah! sergeant in the Fifth Cavalry when they were at Fort McPherson?"

"Yes."

"You are a pretty healthy ghost, Duff."

"Yes, but I have no time to lose here, Bill, for I wish to serve you, as I have not forgotten the day when my horse was shot and pinned me down, how you came back alone and saved me from the red-skins," and the man spoke with considerable feeling.

"Yes, they would have made a ghost of you on that day, sure; but what are you doing up here, Duff?"

"Playing ghost."

"So I see, for you have a sheet around your form, and a pillow-case over your head with eye-holes in it, as well as I can judge."

"It's a good rig for a grave-walker, sergeant, but somehow you didn't have the nerve to stand fire."

"I'd have scared any other man but you, Bill."

"Yes, any man who believed in the supernatural; but my associations with the dead have been too intimate and long-continued for me to fear them."

"You frightened the gerloot who was with me, though."

"That was but a trick."

"A trick?"

"Yes, Bill, for he is one of the band."

"The Buckskin Bravos?"

"Yes."

"And you?"

"Am also a Buckskin."

"I remember that you got into some trouble in the regiment, Duff, and took French leave."

"Yes, I got maddened by drink, shot one of the men whom I was gambling with, and fled for my life."

"And you turned outlaw?"

"Yes."

"You are too good a fellow, Duff, for the work, and if I did not have a memory, too, as well as you, and recall how you nursed me faithfully once through long weeks when I was wounded, I'd walk you to Colonel Burr's Post, and get you shot on three counts, killing a soldier comrade, deserting, and turning outlaw."

"But you will not, Bill, as I wish to serve you now."

"Listen, and I will tell you how."

"Talk quick, then, for I have work to do."

"The retreat of the band is not far from here."

"That I know."

"The captain—"

"Colorado King?"

"Yes."

"Well, go on."

"He left here with three men to seek the nearest station on the stage-road and go East, intending to return when the snow and ice get out of the Hills to allow of work."

"Robbing and cutting throats?"

"Well, it isn't any better work, as you can judge; but to my story."

"They hadn't been gone so very long before we got the signal of danger."

"What signal?"

"The bell from the bridge, for you crossed the air bridge in coming here."

"Yes, but who gave the signal?"

"The man with you."

"Nick Nesbit?"

"Yes."

"How did he give you a signal?" asked Wild Bill, mystified.

"I will not tell you how; but there is a way to signal the camp from the bridge, and we got a signal that told us of danger."

"What was it the signal said?" quietly asked the scout.

"It said:

"A foe is coming, with me a prisoner; guard the pass behind us, and let the ghost turn him back."

"Then there was another signal which gave us the name of the one sending us the warning."

"And that was Nick Nesbit?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I see, and I understand Nick's terror at the bridge: he was pulling some line beneath it all the time he pretended to be in fear of falling; and sending the camp word to prepare for me."

"And you are the ghost that was to turn me back?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't turn worth a cent, so have broken in upon your little game."

"But where is the pass?"

"At the entrance to this canyon."

"And there are guards there awaiting me when I turn back?"

"Yes, Bill, so I will show you a way to escape them."

"I don't wish to escape them, ex-sergeant."

"But there are three men there, Bill."

"All right; I have no desire to avoid them, Duff."

"But they are ambushed, and will shoot you down from cover as you ride back, while Nick Nesbit, if you did not kill him, has doubtless joined them too."

"I shot his horse, but did not hurt him, unless the fall knocked his brains out, for which I would be sorry, for I hope to see him hanged some day."

"Bill, take my warning, and let me show you a way by which you can avoid the men at the pass," earnestly said Duff Scott.

"Sergeant, I believe you mean me well, but I am going back to the pass."

"I am sorry to have to ask you for your ghostly garments; but I must do it."

"Oh, Bill! the band will kill me."

"No, you can tell them that I didn't scare, got the drop on you, and played ghost myself."

"They'll suspect me, if you go back in this rig."

"I hope not, Duff; but my life is worth to me more than the value I set on yours, so I will take the coffin finery, and you must take the chances with the band."

"Come, off with that white duster and meal-bag!"

There was no time to hesitate or trifle, and the outlaw saw it, so at once obeyed the order, though evidently with great reluctance.

Throwing the white apparel about him, Wild Bill said:

"I guess I make as fine a ghost as you did, sergeant, and I may prove a little more dangerous to the boys at the pass."

"Good-by, Duff Scott, and take my advice and give up outlaw life, for it's a bad business, and sure to end badly for you."

Without another word Wild Bill turned and walked away, followed by his faithful horse, while the Buckskin Bravo stood gazing after him, his hand upon the revolver in his belt, and seemingly half inclined to risk a shot at the man whom he had sought to serve awhile before.

He had no desire to kill Wild Bill from any feeling against him; but to kill him would make him stand well with the band, and not to do so might cause his outlaw comrades to look upon him as a traitor, for, how else could the scout have become possessed of the ghostly apparel, and the pretended ghost remain free, would be their way of thinking, Duff Scott well knew.

The weird idea of playing ghost had been a plan of Colorado King to frighten off any prowling scout or hunter from the post, that might be near the outlaw retreat, and the fall before, though they had their camp elsewhere, the Buckskin Bravos had found the scheme work well, as the superstitious denizens of the garrison had never cared to get more than one glance at the weird being.

But Wild Bill was on the watch, indifferent as

he seemed to be when he walked away, and had the outlaw attempted to draw a weapon from his belt, the act would have been his last, for the scout already had his rifle in hand, and was glancing over his shoulder to note the slightest hostile movement.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DEADLY APPARITION.

WHEN Wild Bill walked away from the man who had played ghost with such poor success, he had made up his mind what course he would pursue.

He was well aware that he would labor under a very great disadvantage riding upon men in ambush, and he was not so foolhardy as to throw his life away, for, though he had escaped death at times in a manner that seemed miraculous, yet the frequent wounds he had received proved well enough that he was vulnerable.

To circumvent the outlaws in the ambushade then, he must use strategy, he knew.

Going into the shadow of the canyon where Nick Nesbit had fled in pretended fright at sight of the ghost, he found the horse of the outlaw lying there dead, for his bullet had brought him down, though missing the rider, for Wild Bill had fired at random in the darkness that enveloped the flying horseman the moment he entered between the overhanging cliffs.

But Nick Nesbit was nowhere to be found, although the scout made a close search for him, thinking he might have been hurt by the falling of his horse.

"The treacherous rascal got up and ran on to join his comrades at the Pass, thinking I would soon return and fall an easy prey to them."

"Well, I will return, but I don't intend to let them have it all their own way," and Wild Bill started on down the canyon.

He remembered that the entrance to the canyon, called by the outlaws "The Pass," was some distance from the break or opening where he had been deserted so quickly by Nick Nesbit, so he walked briskly along, Black Diamond following, until he came to where he knew but a few hundred feet separated him from the guards who were lying in ambush for him.

Here he halted Black Diamond, standing him close in under the shadow of the cliff, and throwing his rein over the saddle-born so that he would not crop grass.

"Now, old fellow, you be ready to come to me when you hear my call, and come in a hurry, too, or you may find me a ghost in reality," said the scout, affectionately patting the arched neck of the beautiful animal, who tossed his head with an air that seemed to show that he fully understood the position of affairs and just what was wanted of him.

Then arranging his ghostly attire, and with a revolver grasped in each hand, Wild Bill walked slowly down toward the entrance to the cavern, Black Diamond remaining where his master had placed him.

As he neared the mouth of the canyon, the moonlight pierced through the trees, and rendered his white-robed form weirdly conspicuous.

In size he was but little taller than the sergeant, and he was good enough as a mimic to imitate the voice of the man whose spectral garb he wore, should he be called to by any of the ambushed outlaws, which he did not doubt would be the case.

The mouth of the canyon was a wild and picturesque spot, with the high cliffs upon either side, half a hundred yards apart, fringed with trees, and at their base huge boulders, which seemed to have fallen from the rocky walls, lying here and there, and covered with a growth of scrub cedars.

Behind some of the covert hiding-places, Wild Bill felt assured that the outlaws were hiding, and he kept a bright watch out for them.

Nearer and nearer he approached the canyon's entrance, and as no sign of his foes was visible, he gave a low whistle.

Almost instantly a form stepped out from behind one of the rocks, and as the moonlight fell upon him, Wild Bill saw that he was clad in buckskin, and carried a rifle across his arm, ready for use, in addition to his wearing a belt of arms.

"Is that you, Duff?" the outlaw asked.

"Yes, I'm the ghost, pard," was the reply, in no bad mimicry of the voice of Duff Scott.

"Yer well-nigh scared me, you look so 'tarnal gravelike in your coffin clothes; but whar in thunder is Wild Bill, for Nick tells us he are ther rooster we has ter tackle?"

"He's in the canyon; but where are the rest of the boys?" said Bill, advancing directly upon the outlaw.

"They is here. Come, pards, it's Duff thet played ghost, and he's come to tell us whar Wild Bill is," called out the outlaw, and at his words three other men appeared from behind as many different rocks, two of them armed with rifles.

In the third individual Wild Bill recognized Nick Nesbit. Feeling that the decisive time for action had come, he brought his revolvers to a level, shouting:

"Fire away, Buckskins, for I'm not such a ghost as I look!"

CHAPTER XX.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

WITH his words, which told the amazed outlaws that their comrade was not before them, but one of whom they stood in far greater awe than of a "real live ghost," Wild Bill drew trigger, and two reports mingled together.

With the crack of the revolvers two men dropped dead, while, before the third guard, and Nick Nesbit, who was unarmed, could understand what had happened, they were covered by the unerring weapons of the scout, who shouted out:

"Hands up!"

Quickly they obeyed, the guard dropping his rifle to raise his hands above his head.

"Nick Nesbit, disarm that man!" ordered Wild Bill.

Trembling with fear, now that he knew who it was that had come upon them under the disguise of the ghost, and confident that Wild Bill was aware that his fright was feigned, and knew his treachery, Nick Nesbit obeyed the order given him, and quickly disarmed the guard.

Then stepping forward Wild Bill said:

"Where are your horses?"

"My horse you kilt, pard Bill."

"I know that, and it would be better for you had you died with your horse by a bullet."

"But where are the horses belonging to the three men who guarded this pass?"

"Behind yonder boulder."

"Lead the way there!"

The two men walked to the designated rock, and behind it were found three horses already saddled and bridled.

Lariats hung upon the saddle-borns, and taking two of them Wild Bill quickly bound his prisoners, whom he made mount two of the horses.

Then he gave a long, shrill call, and over the frozen ground was heard the clatter of hoofs.

The next instant, with a low whinny, Black Diamond dashed up to the spot.

But, when the clatter of his hoofs ceased, there was heard the rapid approach of a number of horses, rushing through the canyon at a speed that must soon bring them to the pass.

"Our pards!" said the outlaw guard in a low tone to Nick Nesbit, and both men held hope that the band would be able to rescue them from their single captor.

But Wild Bill knew just who was coming, and what to expect, and throwing himself into his saddle, he called out sternly:

"Ride for your lives!"

"It hain't our lives as is in danger," growled the outlaw guard.

"You lie, for I shall kill you, if you do not at once ride at full speed."

This was said in a voice that admitted of no trifling, and Nick Nesbit said quickly and anxiously:

"Come, pard, let us do it, for he's brim-full of kill to-night."

Wild Bill raised his revolver and covered the guard, and thus admonished he urged his horse into a gallop, Nick Nesbit by his side, and Wild Bill following close behind.

Hardly had they dashed out of the shelter of the rocks, when there came in sight a party of half a dozen horsemen, coming on at full speed.

A wild yell broke from the outlaw guard at sight of them, to attract their attention, and he called out:

"To ther rescow, pards, for we is capter'd by Wild Bill, who are runnin' us off!"

Wild Bill, made no remark at this, while the shouts of the coming outlaws in response showed that they had heard what their comrade had said and would make an effort to recapture them, and also to take the scout whom they stood in such awe of.

"Push on, then!" suddenly ordered Wild Bill, as the party in chase seemed to be gaining.

"We is doin' our best," was the surly response.

"I'll take those horses into the post with me, with you dead on their backs, if you don't push them!"

This ominous threat had the desired effect, for the two outlaws urged on their horses at their greatest speed.

Presently the bridge came in sight, and, as his prisoners were bound, with their hands behind their backs, Wild Bill spurred in between them and reined in their horses.

Then he let the animal of Nick Nesbit go first, the horse of the second outlaw follow, and turning in his saddle, raised his matchless Winchester to his shoulder, to check the too rapid advance of the pursuers.

There was a sudden drawing up, as the bright moonlight revealed the act, showing how thoroughly all knew the deadly aim of Wild Bill.

But the touch upon the trigger sent a bullet flying into their midst, and a horse went down with a heavy fall, throwing his rider over his head.

They dared not return the fire for fear of killing their comrades, or Wild Bill, whom all were most anxious to capture alive, and the

scout followed his captives upon the frail bridge.

They crossed in safety, and seeking shelter behind some trees near by, Wild Bill hitched the horses of his prisoners and then called out, as he saw the pursuers preparing to cross:

"The man who rides upon that bridge I kill!"

Quickly the outlaws fell back to the shelter of the thicket upon their shore, and feeling confident that he had checked their advance for the present, Wild Bill hastened away, leaving the captives and horses there, while he went after the prisoner whom he had left bound and gagged in the thicket further up the ravine.

Finding him, he was quickly relieved of the gag and bound in his saddle in haste, for Wild Bill knew not what moment the pursuers might make the attempt to cross the ravine, thinking he had gone.

Should they cross while he was away, and once gain the timber upon this side of the ravine, they would rescue his prisoners he well knew, and capture Black Diamond also, while, at the same time, they would place him in a most perilous position, on foot as he would be in the midst of his foes.

CHAPTER XXI.

WILD BILL'S DEFIANCE.

HARDLY had Wild Bill started upon his return to the timber where he had left the two outlaws, and was leading the horse of his third captive quietly along, when he had reason to regret that he had not gagged those he left there.

The nature of the ground was such at that point that he would have been seen from the other bank of the ravine, had he attempted to ride to where the first prisoner he had taken was hidden, so he wished to let the outlaw pursuers believe that he was still in the timber, ready to keep them at bay should they make an effort to cross, and thus it was that he went on foot.

But his absence was soon noticed by his two captives, and Nick Nesbit said:

"He told me, pard, that he had one of the men, who started with the captain, tied up over in the thicket, and I guess he has gone for him."

"I'll be sart'in thet he hes, an' then ther boys on t'other shore will hear from me," was the answer.

"Better not, for he'll kill you if he gets back," urged the more timid Nick.

"Waal, he'll hang me if he takes me to ther post, an' shootin' is a more pleasanter death."

Nick Nesbit shook his head, as though he did not think any means of death was preferable to another, and his comrade looked earnestly about in the timber for Wild Bill.

Nowhere was he to be seen, and to make assurance doubly sure, he called out:

"Say, Wild Bill! I think ther boys is comin' over, an' yer oughter let me go fer tellin' yer."

No answer came, and, convinced that Wild Bill was really not in the thicket, the outlaw raised his voice and shouted:

"Ho, pard Buckskins, hear me!"

"Is that you, Barney?" came from the other bank.

"It are, and me and Nick Nesbit is here, tied on our horses, and the animles is hitched to a tree, while Wild Bill hev levanted."

Every word was distinctly heard, not only by the outlaws across the ravine, but by Wild Bill, and though by no means grammatically expressed, was fully as well understood as though the purest English had been used.

From the outlaws came a cheer, and there was mounting in hot haste and spurring from their shelter out into the moonlight, while a voice shouted:

"We'll save you, pards!"

As for Wild Bill, he knew that no time was to be lost, and he sprang nimbly to a seat behind the outlaw, and, ceasing to look for cover any longer, headed straight for the spot where he had left his prisoners.

He knew that it would be impossible to gain the bridge and keep back the half-score of men he knew were in the chase, so all he sought to do was to get away once more with his captives and make it another run for life.

He dashed up to the spot where he had left them, just as the pursuers were strung out upon the bridge, and Barney expected that his moment of doom had come.

But Wild Bill did not speak to him, and severing the lariats that held the two horses, quickly made them fast together, tying the animal ridden by his third captive along with the others.

"Now push, you devils, or I'll help you along!" he ordered, sternly, as he threw himself upon the back of Black Diamond and laid the end of his lariat upon the backs of the three horses before him.

Away they bounded, Black Diamond close upon their heels, just as the first outlaw rode off the bridge, followed rapidly by others.

Out from the timber then dashed Wild Bill and his captives, into the daylight, for dawn had now paled the moonlight, and at once the outlaws set up a yell as they began a hot pursuit over the frozen ground.

Driving his prisoners before him, his revolver held in one hand, Wild Bill rode grimly along, while the outlaws came swiftly on in hot pursuit.

The pursuers were within range, yet dared not fire at the inflexible Bill when he was so near their comrades, and knowing this Wild Bill defied them.

But Barney knew his danger, and seeing that Wild Bill was in a fair way to triumph, as the outlaws feared to crowd one whom they knew to be so dead a shot, he called out, as they sped along:

"Fire on him, pards! Never mind us, so you kills him, for we will be hanged anyway!"

Nick Nesbit and the other bandit at once raised a yell against this, while the pursuers gave a cheer for Barney's pluck, the leader of the party calling out:

"Bully for you, Barney!"

Seeing that they intended to fire upon him, Wild Bill spurred ahead of his prisoners, halted them, and, shielding himself and Black Diamond with their horses and bodies, he threw his rifle to his shoulder and the crack followed immediately.

From his saddle fell an outlaw, just as the party had halted to fire a volley at the scout, intending to take as good aim as possible, shielded as he was by their comrades.

But his deadly shot scattered them quickly to get beyond range, and with a mocking laugh of defiance Wild Bill once more started off with his prisoners, who gave a sigh of relief that that ordeal of death at least was passed.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE STROKE FOR FREEDOM.

THE Hills were certainly in no condition for traveling, as the valleys and canyons were blocked with ice and snow, and the streams were all swollen beyond their banks, so that it made it most difficult for man or horse to get along.

With his three prisoners, however, Wild Bill set off for the post, determined that he would not allow untoward circumstances to triumph over him.

All through the day he drove the three horses before him, going at a slow pace, as, not daring to leave his captives free, their horses had no aid from their riders and had to look out for themselves.

When night drew near Wild Bill looked about for a safe camping-place, for he dared not attempt to continue his way in the darkness owing to the frozen ground and almost impassable barriers of ice that frequently had confronted them.

He selected a pine thicket, under the shelter of a hill, and soon had a roaring fire built. The prisoners were then dismounted and bound near the fire, while the horses were allowed to graze upon what little verdure they could find.

A shot from the scout had brought down a deer, and this was soon dressed and tempting pieces of juicy meat were broiling upon the coals, the prisoners looking on the while with hungry anticipation after their long day's ride and fast.

"Pards, I don't wish to be hard on you, so I'll let your hands loose while you eat your supper, but I'll keep my eye on you all the same," said Wild Bill, and he led his captives to a log before the blazing fire and unfastened their hands.

Then he placed near them the meat for their supper, and took a seat upon the opposite side of the fire, his revolver in his hand.

The three men set to with a will, broiling their meat and eating, while Barney, the devil-me-care one of the trio, cracked jokes about their dangerous position, yet raised no laugh from his fellow-captives.

"You are a game one, Barney," said Bill, admiring the man's pluck.

"Think so, Billy?"

"I do."

"Waal, it's good praise from a man of your nerve, and I enjoy it."

"But won't you have a bite of this steak?"

"I'll eat my supper after you have finished, Barney."

"Oh! you go to the second table, does yer! Waal, you knows best, and I tells yer flat-footed that you do right to watch me, for if I got the chance I'd give you the slip, if I had to take your life to do it."

"I know that, Barney; but I do not intend to give you the chance," answered Wild Bill, with a smile.

"You is right, Bill, and I don't blame yer."

"Would do the same if I was you and you was me."

"Come, Nick, give that log a kick into the fire, for it's getting chilly."

And Barney shuddered, while, as Nick Nesbit did not seem to place the log to suit him, he continued:

"Thar is some folks so born thet they don't know nothing about making a fire, an' you is one of 'em, Nick, fer that don't make blaze enough to scare a wolf off."

"See here, man!"

As he uttered the last words Barney seized the log, which had one end in the fire, and

raised it, as though to throw it upon the blazing heap.

But then, quicker than thought, he hurled the blazing fagot straight at Wild Bill, and then, with his feet bound as they were, gave a mighty leap right across the fire directly toward his foe.

The attack was wholly unexpected to Wild Bill, and but for his quickness of movement the missile would have struck him fairly in the face, disfiguring him for life.

But as it was he sprang to his feet, and the burning log struck him in the breast, knocking his revolver from his hand, and the blow throwing him flat upon his back.

Before he could rise or draw another weapon the foot-bound outlaw was upon him, grasping his arms in a wild embrace, while he shouted out to his comrades:

"Now, pards, do your work an' Wild Bill is ours!"

It was evident that the two remaining outlaws had been as much taken by surprise by Barney's act as was Wild Bill, for though they sprang to their feet at the bold stroke for freedom made by their comrade, they stood still, as though not knowing what to do.

Seeing this, and realizing his inability to cope with Wild Bill's marvelous strength, and that, bound as he was, the struggle could last but a moment, Barney shouted out:

"Cowards! don't yer intend ter help me ag'in' this beur giant?"

Instantly aroused to action by this appeal, the two men hobbled toward the two struggling men and threw themselves upon the scout, Nick Nesbit getting a grip upon the throat of Wild Bill, which he could not shake off, hampered as he was with Barney and the other outlaw's clutch.

At last, however, Wild Bill managed to throw Barney to one side, and temporarily free from all but Nesbit's clutch, he drew a revolver and a dull report followed, and the weight of a dead man was upon him.

"One o' us is wiped out! but cling to him, Nick!" yelled Barney, and as Nick Nesbit had not once released his vise-like grasp upon the scout's throat the pressure began to tell, for Wild Bill's arms suddenly became powerless, and he sunk back apparently unconscious.

"He's dead, Barney," cried Nick.

"Nary; it hain't in him ter die with ther choking; but it hev shut off his wind fer awhile, an' afore he gets up steam ag'in we hev got ter fix him so as he cannot git away," and Barney at once freed himself of the lariat about his ankles and securely bound Wild Bill, whose face was almost black from the choking he had received from Nick Nesbit.

"Now I guesses ther tables is tained, an' we hes ther great Wild Bill fer keeps," said Barney, with an air of satisfaction at his triumph.

"Yes, but he has killed our pard, Barney."

"I wouldn't have cared ef he had kilt you too, Nick, so thet we got him all right; for he are worth the life of any man in ther band 'ceptin' myself, and ther boys will have a lively time of it when we gits back with our game."

"As the captain is dead I guess they'll make you chief, Barney," said Nick.

"Is you so dead sart'in ther captain are dead?"

"Yes, for he went over from the bridge into the canyon, which was a roaring torrent, as you know."

"And he is like a cat with nine lives, so I won't take stock in his being dead until I sees him with his toes turned up."

"Hello, Bill, you is revivatin', I sees," and Barney turned his gaze upon Wild Bill, who just then opened his eyes upon the situation to find himself bound hand and foot, the dead outlaw serving as a pillow for his head, and the captives that were now holding him at their mercy.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

It was with a single glance at his foes that Wild Bill took in the situation, and knew that he was a prisoner.

At the remark of Barney he smiled, and, speaking with difficulty, for his throat pained him, he said:

"Yes, I have revived, Barney, and find you master of the situation."

"I are, in fact."

"And you are a plucky fellow, and deserve credit for your turning the tables upon me, and I see I will have to watch you more closely when I get you once more where you bave me now."

"Yer don't mean ter say yer expects sich a thing ter happen, Wild Bill?" asked the outlaw, in surprise.

"Certainly, for a turn about is fair play."

"And you thinks you'll git away?"

"Of course I do."

"How kin yer?"

"You managed it awhile ago."

"Waal, it kinder skeers me ter hev yer talk so, and I'll jist sit up with yer all night, with my gun p'inted right at yer."

Bill laughed, and answered:

"I advise you to do so; but now I want my supper."

"You is hungry?"

"Just what I am!"

"Well, you shall have it; but I feeds yer same as ef yer was a baby, as I hain't going ter let yer have ther use o' yer hands."

"All right; only give me some supper," was the matter-of-fact reply.

Barney at once set to work broiling some more meat, for that which had been on the fire had been burned to a coal.

Giving the scout small pieces at a time, they were eaten with a relish that was surprising, considering the circumstances.

Then Nick Nesbit gathered some logs, threw them on the fire, and the prisoner was placed near it for the night, while the outlaws sat down, enveloped in their blankets, to watch their prisoner until morning, for they dared not go to sleep, securely as they knew that they had bound the Whirlwind.

And thus the long, dreary hours of the night wore by, Bill sleeping soundly, or feigning to do so, and his guards nodding and napping, yet conscious of any movement made by their prisoner.

At last the dawn was at hand, and rising from his warm place by the fire, Nick Nesbit began to throw more logs upon the glowing coals, remarking:

"We must have our breakfast, pard, and get off as soon as we can, for I won't feel safe until we get Wild Bill in camp, and see him strung up."

"Nor I, Nick; fer thar might be prowlin' Injuns or soldiers about, even ef ther hills is full o' ice yet."

"Say, Bill, daylight are comin', an' yer hain't got away yit," and Barney touched the sleeping scout, who at once opened his eyes, and answered:

"No; but the day has not passed yet, Barney, my boy."

"I hope you slept well."

"No, indeedy, for I hed ter keep my eye on you."

"What a pity, for I slept most sweetly, and am as hungry as a bear. Where's Nick?"

"Gone after fodder fer ther fire."

"I am glad of it, for I am a trifle cold."

"Waal, here he comes now with a wagon-load on his back, so yer'll git warmed up pretty soon, tho' I'm guessin' when ther boys is done with yer ter-morrer, yer'll be wantin' ter git cool ag'in, or I doesn't know whar yer is goin'."

"I'll make it warm for you, Barney, if I get the chance," assured Wild Bill, and he arose to a sitting posture, having slept all night with the body of the dead outlaw for a pillow.

Just then he turned his head, as a heavy load of wood was thrown upon the fire, and he heard a clear voice cry out:

"Bad pale-face is my prisoner!"

"Red Star, the Girl Queen of the Blackfeet!" cried the bound Wild Bill, as he saw before him the form of the Indian girl to whom he before owed his life, and beheld her covering the breast of Barney with an arrow drawn back to the full tension of the bow.

She was clad in the heavy buckskin coat which Nick Nesbit had worn, and upon her head was the hat of that worthy, pretty sure indications that Mr. Nesbit had "come to grief" of some kind.

Then her arms full of wood had enabled her, in the early dawn, to reach the camp-fire unrecognized, and suddenly to confront Barney, as she threw down her load, with an arrow leveled at his head.

"Durnation! a Injun gal in Nick's duds, or I sweetly lies! Bill, we is both done fer, sart'in," cried Barney.

Wild Bill's answer was a laugh at the amazed face of the outlaw and the droll appearance of Red Star, who, seeming to realize that she did not appear to advantage in the ungainly suit, with surprising celerity threw off the hat and heavy coat of buckskin.

The act was instantly taken advantage of by the cunning outlaw, who covered her with a revolver, while he cried out:

"You is too pretty ter kill, gal, so I'll jist sell yer ter ther Sioux, an' now you is wuss off then ef yer hedn't comed here ter take me in."

Wild Bill's exclamation of alarm had attracted the attention of Red Star to her peril; but to the surprise of the scout she made no effort to prevent Barney from getting the best of the situation, and did not quail as she gazed squarely into his face.

But her lip curled with scorn as she said:

"Bad pale-face is a fool. Let him look there and see that the Red Star's words are true."

She pointed behind him as she spoke, but Barney was a cunning dog and said with a leer:

"I hes seen that leetle game tried on afore, Injun gal, an' it don't go down with me, fer I doesn't look ahind me ter give you the drop on me ag'in."

A contemptuous exclamation broke from Red Star's lips at his words, and raising her voice she called out in her own tongue:

"Let my young men come before the eyes of this bad pale-face that he may see that Red Star's tongue is not crooked!"

"Durnation an' dead cats! she hes a gang o' bucks at her back! I caves, leetle Injun gal," and Barney lowered his revolver, as there suddenly glided out of the thicket, like phantoms, a score of Blackfeet braves, in all the glory of their war-path paint and feathers.

"Does the bad pale-face see?" asked the Indian girl, with a smile of triumph.

"Waal, I'm thinkin' a blind man c'u'd see them bucks, an' they is more than I loves ter look on— Lordy! thar they has Nick in on-dress uniform, an' he'll cotch his death o' cold," and Barney gazed at Nick Nesbit, who was approaching between two warriors, coatless and hatless, and his hands bound behind him, while upon his face rested a most rueful expression of distress and alarm commingled.

With a celerity which showed long practice the warriors disarmed and bound Barney, who offered no resistance, but said in his odd way, as he was placed by the side of Nick Nesbit:

"Cats an' crickets, Nick! but we is in fer a Injun barbecue, or I sweetly lies, fer these Blackfeet bucks will cook us, sart'in; but how in thunder did yer git Injuns instead o' wood?"

"I went to pick up a log, and found it was that red-skin girl, and it wasn't any use fightin', as there were a dozen on me in a minute."

Wild Bill laughed at this, while Barney called out:

"You needn't feel so funny, Wild Bill, for you'll be worse off with these reds than you would have been with us Buckskins— But, cats an' crickets! look a thar!"

As Barney uttered the words, a ringing cheer was heard, and then came the command in a trumpet voice:

"Charge!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

BEATEN BACK.

"Ho! Lockwood to the rescue!" shouted Wild Bill as he recognized the trumpet tones of Lieutenant Harry Lockwood, who had given the order to his men to charge the camp.

Anxious about the scout, the brave young lieutenant had gained leave from Colonel Burr to leave the post to look him up.

With a few picked men, mounted upon the best horses, and with a good guide and scout, the young officer had taken the trail and pushed ahead with all the speed they could go in the then condition of the hills and valleys.

The trail of the red skin band under Red Star, the Girl Indian Queen, had been met, and the young officer determined to follow it, hoping to surprise the red-skins in camp, and thus make up for his want of numbers, as he knew that they had double his force.

Night had caused him to go into camp, but at the very first glimmer of day he was in the saddle once more, and the guide soon reported a camp-fire ahead.

They had ridden upon it so close without seeing it that Harry Lockwood felt that they must not delay an instant, so gave the order to charge at once upon the camp, as the warriors were plainly visible, and only their being taken up with what was going on about them prevented their seeing the approaching soldiers.

Barney, however, saw them, and his words gave the alarm, and instantly every warrior sprang to cover and opened upon the charging cavalry.

Being thus prepared, with arms in their hands, and an advantageous shelter near in the thicket, the Blackfoot warriors were able to meet their white foes at a disadvantage, and sent a shower of arrows upon them which brought down a couple of men and several horses.

But Harry Lockwood was nothing daunted, and emptying his revolvers into the thicket, wherever a red-skin was visible, he continued his headlong charge, until another volley of arrows, and a few shots from Indians armed with rifles, brought down his horse and hurled him into a snow-bank.

"Great God! he will be killed!"

"Ho, men! rally and save your gallant leader!" cried Wild Bill, rising on one elbow and shouting to the soldiers, who gallantly dashed forward to the aid of the lieutenant, upon whom the red-skins were rushing with exultant yells.

"I hopes they'll be like ther cats o' Kilkenny, Bill," said Barney, gazing with deep interest upon the scene.

Though with an arrow sticking in his arm, and a bullet-wound in his shoulder, the daring young officer sprang to his feet and faced his red foes, his sword in one hand, and his clubbed revolver in the other, for he had fired his last shot.

On the red-skins rushed upon the brave man at bay, but the troopers now charged in a body, and the withering fire of their revolvers sent the Indians to cover once more.

In an instant the soldiers fell back, their lieutenant in their midst, and dragging their dead with them, among the latter being the guide, who had fallen just as he reached the side of his commander.

Wounded and dismounted himself, with half

of the horses of his men killed, his guide and three soldiers dead, four wounded, Harry Lockwood saw that there was but one course for him to pursue, and that was to retreat, so he reluctantly gave the order.

But the Indians had suffered severely, too, and were in no mood to follow up their victory, so to the surprise and delight of the soldiers they were allowed to go their way unmolested. Yet they felt the necessity of pushing on until they arrived at a good camping-place, where they could protect themselves if attacked.

Then the wounded were looked after, the dead buried, and the retreat was resumed.

But here another danger stared them in the face, for, with the guide dead, there was no one to lead them back to the post.

Harry Lockwood was by no means a skillful scout, and his men knew next to nothing about finding their way in the hills and on the prairies, while the midday sun melted the snows and their trail made in going was quickly obliterated.

Taking his bearings as well as he could, the young officer pushed ahead, though suffering with his wounds, and his men followed, growing more and more despondent with every step they made.

With little food, the croppings only which they could get, the horses too began to fail, and night settled down upon the party in a most dreary mood, in spite of the young lieutenant's efforts at cheerfulness.

Then, too, it was discovered that the man who had carried the matches and provisions for the party had been killed, and the pack-horse had been captured by the red-skins, so that they had to go into a fireless camp, with the chill winds whistling about them, hungry, wretched, and dreading that they might be pursued by their red foes and attacked at a disadvantage which the greatest bravery upon their part could not overcome.

CHAPTER XXV.

RED STAR'S FRIENDSHIP.

WHEN Wild Bill had hailed the approaching troopers in their headlong charge upon the camp, and called Lieutenant Lockwood to the rescue, he had believed that there was a much larger force at the young officer's back than eventually appeared, and he did not doubt but that the soldiers could put the red-skins to flight.

But the loud hail of Wild Bill had not been heard by the cavalymen, nor, in fact, had the three white men been seen by them, so that the soldiers knew not that the scout whom they were searching for was so near them.

When Wild Bill beheld the paucity of numbers of the troopers, and saw that the Indians had found good shelter for themselves, and outnumbered their white foes greatly, he had shouted to the soldiers to go back in good order.

But as he did so, the horse of Harry Lockwood fell dead, throwing his rider into the snowbank, and the scout feared that the end had come.

But the gallant charge of the men, to rescue their idolized young commander, brought ringing cheers from the lips of Wild Bill, who forgot himself in his interest in the fight.

"Oh, that I had my arms free and a revolver in each hand!" groaned Wild Bill, as the troops fell back in haste.

"I guesses yer'd make red-skin fur fly jist about now, Bill," said Barney, who heard the wish expressed.

"I hope they will kill the soldiers, for they are as much our foes as are the red-skins," remarked Nick Nesbit.

"Well, my friends, you are doomed to die by Indian torture instead of being hanged, for the red-skins have won the day," said Wild Bill, as he saw the troopers retreat rapidly out of sight.

"You say *we* is, Bill, but yer don't refer ter yerself," rejoined Barney.

"Perhaps they won't torture me," was the quiet reply.

"What is yer givin' us, pard?"

"I mean it, that I do not believe the Indians will torture me to death; but I am certain they will make it hot for you."

"Does you take us fer fools, pard, ter think thet ther reds would let Wild Bill, thar deadest foe, hev a picnic o' freedom, while Nick an' me here is entertained with ther howlin' about us, previous to torturin' us to death?"

"Wait and see, pards, what will be done, and whatever comes, I'll face it."

"And me too, Wild Bill, fer I'll die with religion ef they'll only let me see 'em start you on ther long trail ter kingdom come fust."

Just then Red Star came up, and there was a flash of triumph in her eyes as she said:

"My braves beat back the pale-face soldiers." As her gaze was upon Wild Bill, he answered:

"Yes, the Blackfoot braves under their Girl Queen were victorious; but what will the Red Star do with her captives?" and Wild Bill looked squarely in the face of the maiden.

For a moment she made no reply, while one

by one her warriors, flushed with victory, but with angry eyes at the losses they had met with, came and stood in a semicircle about the prisoners.

"Has the white chief been upon the trail of my people?" asked Red Star, calmly.

"No, I have been on the trail of these robber pale-faces, and they were my captives; I was taking them to the camp of my people, when they got the best of me, and I again owe the Red Star my life, for they would have killed me had she not come to my aid."

"Cats an' crickets! does ye hear him talk, Nick?" cried Barney.

"I do."

"Waal, he chins as tho' he hed know'd ther gal from a pappoose, and 'spected she'd say ter him thet he c'd git, while we waster be kept as amusements fer her braves."

Red Star seemed to understand pretty well what Barney said, for she answered quietly:

"The bad pale-face talks straight, for the Red Star owes her life to the white chief, and she will let him go free."

As she uttered the words she stepped forward and quickly untied the lariat with which the feet and hands of the scout were bound.

"Nick, does yer see?" groaned Barney.

"Yes, we are in for it, pard," was the doleful answer of Nesbit.

"It do look as tho' ther gal were stuck on Bill, and are going ter make us a present to him," and Barney watched eagerly for the next turn in the tide for or against himself and Nick Nesbit.

Rising to his feet and shaking himself together, to start the blood in circulation after his cramped position for hours, Wild Bill said, gently:

"The Red Star is a true friend, and I will not forget her or her people for this act toward one who has for so long been the foe of her race."

"The Red Star has a heart, and she does not forget what the white chief did for her," was the answer.

"That was paid in what she afterward did for me; but does the Red Star mean that I am free to go my way?"

"Yes, the white chief can take his arms and his horse and go."

But already had his weapons been appropriated by one brave and his horse by another, and Wild Bill's knowledge of Indian character was such that he was aware that trouble would follow his attempt to take his property.

He saw also that the two warriors who had seized his arms and horse were a pair who hated him cordially, believing that Red Star loved him, and that he might some day be their rival for the love of their Girl Queen.

Of course they hated each other as cordially as rivals, but against the pale-face scout they made common cause, and were determined not to yield.

Bill recognized them both as braves who he knew had hated him when he lay ill in the Indian village, and he knew them to be powerful men, active as panthers, and boastful of their strength and prowess at arms.

Such a thought as fearing them did not enter his mind; but then he wished to avoid trouble with them, as if he could cement an alliance between the Blackfeet and whites, they could make a common war upon the powerful tribe of Sioux, then masters of the Black Hills.

Red Star also saw the attitude of the two warriors, as one stood holding Black Diamond by the rein, and the other had Wild Bill's belt about his waist and his rifle in his hands.

"Did my braves hear the words of Red Star?" she asked, turning upon the two Indians.

"The Red Star gives the pale-face foe of our people his life."

"Let him take that and go!" answered Wolf-Killer, the warrior who held the rein of Black Diamond.

"The Red Star gives back to the white chief his horse and his arms."

"Let my braves give them up," quietly said the Indian girl.

"The Wolf-Killer speaks well; let the white warrior take his life and strike the trail for the camps of his people," boldly remarked Panther Eye, the second one of the two rebellious braves.

"Do my warriors refuse to obey the words of their queen?" asked Red Star.

Before either could reply Barney blurted out:

"You two red niggers holds trumps, so don't throw down no keerd thet hain't goin' ter win."

"Ther gal hes give Bill his life, an' ef he are so greedy as ter want his horse an' weepins, let him fight fer 'em."

A number of the Blackfoot braves understood sufficient English to master these words of the outlaw, and the nods of approval from around the circle showed to Red Star that she must submit to the will of her warriors in this particular, should she wish to continue to hold the power over them she then possessed.

So she said:

"The white chief hears what my braves say?"

"Why, I'll only be too happy to tackle Mr. Wolf-Killer and Panther Eye, if that is their little game."

"That's music thet I loves; let the cirks begin," cried Barney, anxious to see Wild Bill slain, happen to himself and Nick Nesbit afterward what might.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DUEL.

PANTHER EYE and Wolf-Killer had both seen too much of the great strength and unerring aim of Wild Bill to be exactly pleased with the idea that they had to meet him in a deadly combat.

Like all Indians they would face any danger where there was a chance for life to be saved in winning honor; but where the odds were against them they were by no means anxious to accept the alternative of a single combat with the noted scout.

Each one hoped that he might win the Red Star for his wife, at some future day, and an encounter with Wild Bill seemed to threaten that this hope would never be realized.

Still, what could they do after having taken the property of Wild Bill, but fight to hold it?

Therefore with a braggadocio air Panther Eye began to sing his valor, and Wolf-Killer followed suit, until one would have thought the deeds done by them would make Wild Bill tremble with dismay.

"Better not shout so much, red pards, fer yer hes work afore yer ter git away with Bill Hickok, and don't you fool yerselfs thet yer hain't; but I hopes ye'll come out at ther top o' ther heap," said Barney, deeply interested in the intended combat.

"How does the Red Star wish that I shall meet her braves?" calmly asked Wild Bill.

"Let the white chief choose, for he is one against two," answered the Red Star, evidently not pleased with the proposed duel, yet not wishing to show too great preference for the pale-face scout, whom she had learned to love with all the devotion of her nature.

The truth is, she had led her warriors upon a scouting expedition in the hope that she would find out something about Wild Bill, or see him, as his departure from her village before spring had fairly set in had given her great anxiety regarding his fate.

A fortunate circumstance had brought her to the aid of the scout, when in the power of his outlaw foes, and now she feared that he was about to face two of her best warriors in an encounter that might prove fatal to him.

Still she hid her feelings from the eyes of her braves, and calmly told Wild Bill to select his own mode of fighting.

"Rifle, revolver, knife or arrow, are all the same to me," said Wild Bill, with an air of perfect indifference.

The two warriors surveyed the superb physique of the white man, and came to the conclusion that an encounter at close quarters would result in their defeat, and by a glance at each other, which was well understood, they determined to depend upon their bows and arrows, feeling that Wild Bill was less skilled in the use of these weapons of savagery than in anything else.

"The Wolf-Killer will fight with the weapons of the red man," said the warrior, pompously.

"That means the bow and arrow, or the tomahawk?" Wild Bill returned, inquiringly, while Barney put in:

"Or his legs, fer them is great weepins in Injun-fightin'."

"The bow and arrow," answered Wolf-Killer.

"And the Panther Eye?" asked the scout.

"The Wolf-Killer has spoken," was the pompous reply.

"Then the bow and arrow suit you as well?"

The warrior nodded.

"The Red Star bears what her warriors say?" and Wild Bill turned to the Indian girl, who answered:

"Yes."

"Then let the Red Star bid her warriors mount their ponies and the white chief will ride his horse, and we will charge upon each other from a certain point, armed only with bows and arrows, and allowed to fire only after the horses cross a certain line."

As he saw that the Indians did not exactly understand his plan of the duel, Wild Bill was about to explain it more fully, when Barney broke in with:

"If thet Wild William hain't up ter some leetle game, I serenely lies."

"There cannot be much game to play, Barney, where he fights both of them at the same time, and with their own weapons."

"I want them to kill him, but I do think he is a fool not to take his revolvers, for no white man is the Indian's equal with the bow and arrow," responded Nick Nesbit.

Wild Bill heard the words of the outlaws, but paying no attention to them very carefully explained his plan to Red Star and her braves, who, instead of thinking there was a sinister motive in it, as had Barney, agreed to the terms with the idea that the scout was most liberal.

"The Wolf-Killer will ride the horse of the

scout," said that worthy, still clinging to Black Diamond.

To the surprise of all Wild Bill assented with a smile, and said:

"I will ride that horse," and he pointed to the animal which had been ridden by Colorado King, and afterward by Nick Nesbit, and which was a horse he had known well at the post.

Panther Eye, determined not to lose his own pony by an arrow-shot, selected the horse which Barney had ridden, and the whole party then moved to an open space in the valley, the prisoners being carried along, as Barney said he would not miss the fun for a gold-mine.

"Will the Red Star take the weapons of her white brother from the Panther Eye?" asked Wild Bill, as he saw that it was the intention of that warrior to go into the fight with his arms, which he still held possession of as did Wolf-Killer of Black Diamond.

Without a word Red Star stepped up to Panther Eye and took from his saddle-horn, where it hung by a strap, the Winchester rifle of Wild Bill, and then forced him to unbuckle the belt of arms from about his waist and hand them over to her.

"That are a squar' deal, an' I wish I c'd sympathize with my own color in this scrimmage, which I can't, seein' as how, Bill, yer'd hang me ef yer didn't git kilt in ther picnic that are about ter take place," said Barney.

Wild Bill turned upon him and answered:

"It is, with you and Nesbit, Barney, bad luck whether I live or die, for if the latter, you will be tortured to death by the red-skins, and if the former, I will do all I can to have you hanged."

At this Barney was silenced, for he shuddered at the thought of Indian tortures, while the scout asked:

"Will the Red Star lend her white brother her bow and arrows?"

Instantly the Indian girl unslung them from her back and handed them to the scout, who carefully examined each arrow and the bow, remarking half-aloud to himself:

"As I made these for the girl, I can vouch for their being good."

The Red Star, under directions from Wild Bill, now marked off the stations of the combatants, and placed two lariats as the lines which the horses must cross before an arrow could be fired.

In a low tone Wild Bill said something to Red Star, who at once called the attention of the three combatants to the fact that she would shoot down any one of the three who fired an arrow before his horse had crossed the line.

For this purpose she took her stand, with Wild Bill's Winchester in her hands, midway between the lariats, but off to one side.

The lines were about fifty feet apart, and the distance from them that each had to ride from the starting-point was a hundred yards.

Mounting Colorado King's horse, and armed with Red Star's bow and quiver of arrows, Wild Bill rode to his stand, the two warriors doing likewise.

The signal was to be given by Red Star, by a shot from the scout's rifle, and then the combatants were to charge upon each other.

Of course the one first over the line could begin firing, and thus have the advantage, and speed would be greatly desired.

Knowing what Black Diamond could do, Wolf-Killer looked very confident of getting several arrows in upon the scout before he could cross the line; but though the scout also knew well the speed of his noble black, he did not seem to feel anxious regarding it, and quietly awaited the signal.

Barney and Nick Nesbit had been given good situations to view the combat, though they were kept securely bound, and back of them stood the braves of Red Star's band, deeply interested spectators of the coming struggle.

Red Star herself took her stand, and holding the rifle ready, gave the signal by pulling the trigger.

With the puff of smoke from the muzzle, the three horses bounded away as though shot from the rifle, and the two Indians uttered their ringing war-cries.

Following it came the wild, defiant battle-cry of the scout, thrice repeated, and the effect upon Black Diamond seemed magical, for he began to bound into the air, plunge, shy, and strive to throw his red-skin rider, who had all he could do to keep his seat, and from leading, at once dropped back behind Panther Eye.

The latter was laying his quirt upon his horse with stinging earnestness, while Wild Bill kept his spurs driving into the side of the animal he rode with good effect, sending him along over the snow, slush and mud at a terrific pace.

Faster than the horse ridden by Panther Eye, the steed of Wild Bill crossed the lariat two lengths before the pony of the warrior, and then, with a sudden draw of the muscular arm that held the reins he was dragged back upon his haunches, and forced by the spurs, rose into the air upon his hind feet.

While thus rearing and pawing the air wildly, Panther Eye's pony crossed the line, and a shot from Wild Bill's bow sent an arrow through the body of the warrior, whose own barbed

shaft sunk deep into the neck of the steed ridden by the scout, who had thus protected himself by using his horse as a shield.

The next instant, just as Panther Eye fell from his pony, Black Diamond, plunging and wildly snorting, bounded across the line, his warrior giving up all efforts to restrain him, to use his weapons.

But again the steed of Wild Bill was dragged up into a rearing position, and once more he served as a shield for the scout, catching the arrow in his broad, muscular chest, while the white man's shaft was sent straight to the heart of the red-skin.

Mortally wounded, the horse of Wild Bill suddenly sunk to the ground, while Black Diamond's rider having dropped dead from his saddle, he trotted up to his master with a low neigh of pleasure.

But hardly had the scout placed his hand affectionately on the glossy hide of his noble horse, who had, by his plunging, kept Wolf-Killer from being first across the line, when it was evident that more trouble was brewing, as the band of braves, furious at the fall of two of their number, were talking together excitedly.

"That means mischief toward me; but if I can get my rifle and belt of arms from Red Star, I will face the lot," said Wild Bill, as he saw the angry glances cast at him by the warriors.

Stepping quickly toward Red Star, he held out his hand and asked:

"Will the Red Star give me my weapons now?"

It was evident that the Indian girl saw peril to the scout brewing also, but she said, quickly:

"No, let the white chief remain unarmed."

"And let him see that his pale-face brothers urge my braves on to kill him."

"That is true, those two outlaws are putting them up to this," muttered Wild Bill as he saw Barney talking in earnest tones to the Blackfoot braves.

CHAPTER XXVII.

RED STAR AT BAY.

It was with the most thrilling interest that both Barney and Nick Nesbit, the captive outlaws, gazed upon the duel between Wild Bill and the two Blackfoot warriors.

Barney, ever cunning himself, felt assured that the scout had formed some plan to outwit his foes, when he selected bows and arrows as the weapons to be used in the combat.

Closely watching, he no sooner heard the war-cry of Wild Bill, and saw the strange actions of Black Diamond, which Wolf-Killer rode, than he detected how the scout meant to have at least one Indian late at the meeting.

Then, seeing him draw the horse, which Colorado King had ridden, up on his hind legs, he detected how Wild Bill intended to shield himself from the arrows of his foes.

Colorado King's horse had been trained by his master to rear up and walk for a long distance upon his hind legs, and this Wild Bill knew, hence his selection of the animal, knowing that he could use him to protect himself.

No one else but Barney observed these two little acts of strategy upon the part of Wild Bill, and he determined that they should at once be exposed to the Indians, that thereby he might curry favor with them.

Quickly he told them that Wild Bill had given his horse a signal to act badly with Wolf-Killer, and that he had sacrificed the animal he rode to the arrows of his foes.

The warriors of course saw the affair as Barney intended they should, and were determined that the scout should not gloat over his victory, angry as they were at the fall of two of their best braves at his hands, while he had escaped unscathed.

Stepping forward, as Wild Bill approached Red Star and asked for his arms, a young warrior said boldly:

"The white chief is a snake in the grass. He does not fight fair."

"This comes well from the lips of one of a race who fight only by strategy and cunning," said Wild Bill.

But his meaning was not mastered by the Indian, who in other words could not see that the "cap fitted" in his case and that he condemned another for just the acts that he would be proud of, and Wolf-Killer and Panther Eye, too, had they thought a dodge upon the scout could have been played.

As for Red Star, she could only see that Wild Bill had met and vanquished his foes, and she was determined to have no more trouble.

She saw that Barney and Nick Nesbit were

urging her braves on against Wild Bill, and she intended that the affair should end, so she said, addressing the young warrior who had accused the scout of being a snake in the grass:

"Fighting Crow is a fool, and should stay in the tepees with the squaws, if his tongue talks like a pappoose."

This was a terrible cut from the lips of the girl he loved, and Fighting Crow fairly shivered; but his eyes flashed and he answered in angry tones:

"The Red Star loves the pale-face warrior and would turn her back upon her own people to protect him."

Wild Bill glanced quickly at the girl, to see the effect of the young brave's words, and noted the ghastly hue spread over her dark face, so natural to the Indian when deeply moved.

Stepping up to the brave she said hoarsely:

"Let the Fighting Crow turn his back upon the Red Star and go his way."

"But never enter again the village of his people, for he has thrown dirt in the ears of the Girl Queen of the Blackfeet."

This was a terrible blow for the young warrior, for he loved Red Star with all the earnestness of his savage nature, and he had no desire to give her up.

But it meant more, for it exiled him from his own race, and sent him forth a wanderer to seek a home in another tribe.

That the young queen had a right to thus exile one who offered her deadly insult, he well knew, and that she was in earnest no one could doubt that gazed into her passion-writhing face.

His love, his jealousy, hatred for the scout, and sorrow at his sentence all mingled together in the emotion that stirred his bosom, and he stood like a bronze statue, his eyes fixed upon the ground.

He had one chance to escape the dread fiat, by Indian custom, and all the braves watched him to see if he would take advantage of that chance.

It was for him to throw off his warrior plumage, acknowledge himself as a boy who had not won his spurs, beg to be forgiven and allowed to start again in the tribe as a young buck aspirant for the honors of a brave.

Would he do this?

Could a brave such as young Fighting Crow had often proven himself to be, so humble himself as to drop down the ladder of fame, have his deeds of valor washed out against him, and begin at the bottom round again?

Red Star had always liked the young warrior, and she hoped that he would be content to eat humble-pie, rather than to allow his pride to carry him forever out of his tribe.

But she had uttered the words of doom against him and she would not retract.

Her father, Thunder Cloud, had been a great chief, and her uncle, Moon Burner, was the mighty medicine-chief of the tribe, so she had it in her to be firm.

Besides, on two separate occasions she had saved the tribe from destruction, by going upon secret scouts and detecting the intention of their foes, and this had made her their queen, and given her a power equal to that possessed by her father and the medicine-chief, her uncle.

The silence was unbroken for a full moment, and then, tiring of it, Red Star asked, as she turned her flashing eyes upon the face of Fighting Crow:

"Does the Fighting Crow hear?"

The face of the young warrior was raised from its bent attitude, the eyes looked squarely into those of the Indian girl, and there was no humbleness in the tones that said:

"The Fighting Crow has ears."

"He heard the words of the Red Star."

"He goes alone into the mountains, and upon the plains, for he is a warrior without a tribe, a man without kindred."

"He turns his back upon his people, and upon the graves of his fathers."

"He will let his tongue forget the tongue of his mother, and his eyes forget the faces of those he loved."

"He will bury in his heart the memory of the Red Star, and give the war-cry of defiance to the braves she may put upon his trail."

"The Red Star has ears, and she has heard the words of the Fighting Crow."

Without another word he turned, bounded upon the back of his pony and rode slowly away from the group that in silence watched his going.

As he disappeared in the thicket, without once looking behind him, Red Star turned her gaze upon her braves, and asked sternly:

"Are my young men satisfied that the white chief fought the Wolf-Killer and Panther Eye as warrior meets warrior, or do they wish to follow like fools on the trail of the Fighting Crow?"

It was evident that the Blackfoot braves were bullied into submission by the young Indian girl.

They had demurred, and the words of Fighting Crow had brought her to bay, with a result that rebounded upon himself most disastrously.

In utter silence they received her question, not one caring to measure strength with her.

Seeing this, Barney and Nick Nesbit were in despair, and kept urging the warriors on by whispers, but without effect.

From the faces of her braves the eyes of Red Star roved to Barney and Nick Nesbit, and instantly she turned to Wild Bill, handing him a revolver from her own belt, while she said:

"Those pale-faces are worse foes to the white chief than are my people.

"Let him kill them!"

This was most startling advice both to Wild Bill and the outlaws; but as though he had decided to end their lives at her suggestion, he took the revolver and stepped in front of the two men.

Both turned deadly pale, and the teeth of Nick Nesbit clicked together like a telegraph instrument at work.

They knew that they well deserved death at the hands of the scout, and with such an open invitation from Red Star to kill them, they feared he might be tempted to indulge in the pastime and thus end their sinful careers forever.

"Oh, Bill, don't shoot us!" pleaded Nick Nesbit.

"Shoot and be durned to you, Wild Bill, if you so please, fer shootin' are better dyin' than hangin' an' Injun torturin'," boldly said Barney.

"Barney, you are too nery a man to shoot like a dog, and you, Nick Nesbit, are too cringing a coward to fire upon.

"I'll spare you both, and if the red-skins don't help you to their Happy Hunting-Grounds soon, why, some day in the future I may yet catch and hang you."

With these words Wild Bill turned away and said:

"No, Red Star, I am no coward to kill a man who is wholly at my mercy.

"The prisoners are yours, and you can do as you please with them, while I will go my way alone."

"Will the Red Star see the white chief no more?" asked the girl, in a low tone.

"Yes, some day; but let her tell her people that the pale-faces are her friends, and that their warriors will follow with her braves the trail of the Sioux."

"The Red Star will tell them.

"Now let the white chief go to his people," was the answer, as she gave over the belt of arms and rifle of Wild Bill to him, and which she had withheld, fearing that if he believed he was going to be attacked and used them, she could not stem the fierce fury of her braves against him.

Wild Bill thanked her, said a word in farewell to her warriors, and springing upon the back of Black Diamond, rode away, the curses of Barney and Nick Nesbit following him as long as he could hear them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FIGHTING CROW SEEKS ALLIES.

WE left Lieutenant Harry Lockwood and his little band of troopers in sore distress.

They had camped without fire or food, were chilled through, the lieutenant and several of his men and horses wounded, and without a guide knew not the way back to the post.

The night passed in suffering, and with the morning they started upon their way at random, almost, for the young officer was forced to confess himself at a loss to find the way.

Wearily they plodded along, hungry and

in misery, and without the knowledge to cheer them that they were going right.

Again, toward evening, a halt was called, and the party went into another fireless, foodless camp, for, in spite of the arduous exertions of several of the men during the day, they had been unable to bring down any game.

Hardly had they staked their horses out and huddled together for warmth under the shelter of a cliff, when the soldier acting as sentinel called out:

"There is an Indian in sight, sir."

At once Harry Lockwood staggered to his feet and approached the sentinel, who pointed out an Indian horseman quietly surveying the camp.

Seeing that he was observed, the Indian dismounted, staked his pony out, and then, with a great flourish laid down the rifle, bow and arrows and scalping-knife which he carried.

"He seems to wish us to think he is peaceably inclined, Thornton; but why so, when he is of the Blackfoot tribe, I cannot understand," said Harry Lockwood, addressing his sergeant, who had approached him.

"He is a Blackfoot, sir, that is certain, and his peace ways may mean treachery.

"Shall I send a bullet after him, sir?" returned the sergeant, bringing his carbine round ready for use.

"No, not until we are assured that he is treacherous.

"I will motion for him to advance, and I will meet him."

"No, lieutenant; let me go, sir, for you can hardly walk," returned the sergeant, and unheeding a remonstrance from his wounded and fagged-out officer, the brave soldier stepped quickly forward, threw his carbine at his feet, then drew his sword and stuck it into the ground, while he remarked:

"My revolver I'll stick to just for luck."

It was just sunset, and the act of the sergeant was plainly visible to the Indian, who at once started toward the camp, his hands raised above his head, the palms toward his foes.

Instantly Sergeant Thornton walked toward the red-skin, his hand likewise raised, and all watched the meeting with considerable interest.

The Indian came boldly forward, and meeting the sergeant, stretched forth his hand, with the one word:

"How?"

"How yourself," returned the sergeant, grasping the Indian's hand warmly, and in a way that would have made it hard for him to release the grip, had he attempted treachery.

"Me Fighting Crow," said the warrior, in fair English.

"You are, are you? Well, I am Sergeant Sam Thornton, of the U. S. Cavalry, at your service for a fight or a frolic; so what are your intentions?" was the blunt response of the sergeant.

"Me friend of pale-face warrior."

"Oh, you are?"

The Indian nodded.

"You are a Blackfoot?"

"No, me was Blackfoot brave, but me love pale-face.

"Want to go to white man camp."

"You are just the red-skin we are looking for.

"Do you know where the pale-face camp is?"

"Yes, me know."

"Can you take us there?"

"When sun come again."

"Ah, that means to-morrow."

Fighting Crow nodded assent.

"Are you alone?"

Again a nod.

"No reds lying around to fire on us, or attack our camp?"

"No."

"Why did you leave your people?"

"Fighting Crow love Red Star, Girl Queen of Blackfoot tribe.

"She no love him; tell him to go."

"Ah! the truth in a nutshell, and the same old story of love at the bottom of all, told by an Injun.

"Well, well, a woman in the case, even in the Black Hills," moralized the sergeant, who had suffered from the tender attachment himself in the past.

But to the Indian he said:

"So you levanted, and wish to get white-washed?"

Fighting Crow shook his head.

"I mean that you would like to renounce the devil and all his works and become a galvanized white man?"

"That is, an Indiano-Americano?"

Still the red-skin shook his head, and the sergeant continued:

"To simplify matters, you wish to become the friend of the pale-face?"

"Yes."

"Good! I'll introduce you to my commander, and if he suspects you of playing a little game, he will hang your scalp in his belt and let you live to see it there.

"Come! the Fighting Crow is welcome to the wigwams of his brothers, figuratively speaking, for devil a wigwam have we.

"And that reminds me to ask if the Fighting Crow has the means of striking a fire?"

The Indian nodded assent, and the sergeant continued:

"Has he anything to eat about his clothes?"

"The Fighting Crow has food for his pale-face brothers," and he pointed to his pony, on one side of which hung a leg of venison.

"The Fighting Crow shall be made happy seeing his pale-face brothers eat his venison steaks.

"Let him come with me, and bring his horse."

The Indian seemed pleased, and to show his good intentions motioned to the sergeant to carry his weapons, while he led his horse.

Thus the two went to the camp, and Harry Lockwood was told the story of the red-skin and gave him warm welcome.

To gain favor with his new friends, Fighting Crow at once set to work and built two roaring camp-fires, after which he handed over his leg of venison to the hungry soldiers, who broiled and ate it with an energy that showed how sadly they stood in need of food, and the red-skin came in for many hearty thanks from the lost band of troopers.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TRAITOR.

WITH thankfulness at having secured the services of a guide who could lead them to the post, and having partaken of a good, square meal of venison, while they had fires to warm themselves by, the troopers laid down to sleep for the night, Sergeant Thornton volunteering to stand guard.

Though they trusted the Indian, still it behooved them to keep a watch on him, and he was assigned a place by the fire near Harry Lockwood, who was a very light sleeper, and with the red-skin upon his mind, and his wounds paining him, would awaken at the slightest movement of any one in the camp.

To further convince his white allies of his good faith toward them, Fighting Crow had dressed the wounds of all of them, placing upon them the bruised leaves of a shrub growing near, and it certainly soothed the pain.

He had taken his robe and blanket, and laid down in the spot assigned him without a word, and soon appeared sound asleep.

With little faith in red-skins, Sergeant Thornton had taken his stand at a place where he could obtain a view of the camp, and also command the approach of any one coming up the hillside toward them.

His supper had made him drowsy, but with the knowledge that Fighting Crow might be treacherous, and have played a game of friendship to lure suspicion while his red comrades crept up on the camp, he shook off the feeling of sleep, and devoted himself to the closest watching for anything of a suspicious nature that might turn up.

Ever and anon he would turn his eyes upon the form of the Indian in camp, and once or twice seemed to think it had disappeared.

But a walk toward the fire showed him that it was imagination only, as Fighting Crow seemed to be sleeping the sleep of the red-skin just.

And thus the night passed, and daylight dawned without any alarm, or act of treachery upon the part of their red ally.

This circumstance at once raised Fighting Crow stock above par in the eyes of the troopers, and almost every doubt of him vanished.

The breakfast cleared the bones of the leg of venison clean, and refreshed by their rest, their night of warmth and food, the troopers started out upon the trail to the post, Fighting Crow leading off with the air of one who knew the way there as he did to his own village.

For a couple of hours he led the troopers along, as fast as their hungry, tired horses could go, and then the trail went through a deep canyon.

But suddenly a rifle-crack was heard, and Fighting Crow nearly sprung from his saddle, while from a height afar off came the ringing words:

"Hold, Lockwood! you are being led into a trap!"

All eyes turned in the direction from whence the voice had come, and beheld coming down the steep hillside, a man leading a horse.

"Wild Bill!"

In one wild chorus the name broke from the lips of the troopers, who, intent upon their discovery, had not observed that Fighting Crow had urged his horse into the thicket upon one side of the canyon, and disappeared.

"Where's the Indian?" called out Lieutenant Lockwood.

"There he goes!" shouted Sergeant Thornton, pointing to the red-skin, lying over on the opposite side of his horse, and urging him at great bounds up the steep hillside, opposite the one which Wild Bill was descending.

"Kill him!"

The command came from Wild Bill, but Lieutenant Lockwood called out, as his men drew up their carbines:

"Hold! do not fire upon him, for Hickok does not know that he is friendly!"

This caused the soldiers to halt in their intention, and again Wild Bill shouted:

"Fire at him!"

"Do not allow him to escape."

But the soldiers dared not obey without orders from their commander, and seeing that the Indian was escaping, Wild Bill halted upon the hillside, threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

But though the pony was seen to stagger, he still kept on in his flight.

Again the scout fired, and the pony stumbled badly.

Then a third shot, a fourth, and the matchless Winchester rattled forth its deadly music in rapid discharges.

Down went the staggering pony, while Fighting Crow, springing to his feet, darted on up the hill with the speed of a deer.

Again the rifle of the scout spoke; but the distance was too great, and the red-skin was seen to disappear, apparently unhurt, over the ridge of the hill.

Several times had Lieutenant Lockwood called out to Wild Bill not to fire, and that the Indian was an ally and friend.

But the scout had unheeded the command, and soon after rode into the canyon with the words:

"Quick! out of this, Lieutenant Lockwood, for that red devil was leading you into an ambush at the other end of this canyon."

"Can this be true, Bill?" asked the amazed officer.

"I will tell you what I know as we ride along, sir."

"Quick! push your horses for all they have in them, as there are Indians not three miles from you, and the post is twenty miles away."

There was no hesitancy now, and the troopers followed after the scout in hot haste, he leading them back on the trail which they had come.

"Come, Hickok, tell me what this means?" said Lieutenant Lockwood, when Wild Bill had led them by a narrow ravine out of the canyon and into a valley, which he recognized as being only a few hours' ride from the post.

"It means, sir, that the Indian you trusted was Fighting Crow, one of the bravest and most cunning young warriors of the Blackfoot tribe," answered Wild Bill.

"So he told me, and more, we owe our

lives to him," said Harry Lockwood, warmly, and anxious to befriend his red ally.

"You would have owed your deaths to him had he led you through the canyon."

"But how do you know this, Hickok, against facts which I have to substantiate his friendship?"

"I know by never failing signs which a borderman can read, lieutenant, and I will tell you them."

"Day before yesterday I was in the Blackfoot camp which you attacked."

"Ha! is that so, Bill?"

"I was told by one of the men that he thought he saw a white man bound lying by the fire."

"There were three white men there, sir, two besides myself, and I will tell you who they were."

Then, in a few words, Wild Bill sketched the story of his adventures among the outlaws, and what had followed after his rescue by Red Star.

"By heavens! you have indeed escaped wonderful peril, Bill."

"But you say the Fighting Crow was driven from his tribe by the girl?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why should he not be most willing to ally himself with us?"

"Because he had already formed an alliance with others."

"The truth is, I followed his trail, expecting he intended to ambush me."

"I trailed him to a camp of Sioux, and saw him, from a distance, make friends with them."

"He had already been on your trail, and leaving the Sioux camp, he at once started upon it again, and I understood his purpose."

"And what was that?"

"He had told the Sioux he would lead you into an ambush, and this would make him solid with them."

"I set out to follow him, when I found that I had lost my cartridges, so I had to go back upon my own trail in search of them."

"This delayed me, and finding you gone, and the course the red-skin was leading you, I set out to head him off, for it was directly into the Sioux camp."

"My noble Bill, we owe you our lives; but hark!" and the officer drew rein, while Wild Bill said coolly:

"The Crow has run to the Sioux camp and put them on our trail, so we will have warm work, as there are half a hundred warriors in the band."

CHAPTER XXX.

CHASED BY SIOUX.

"Push on, lieutenant, as you are now going, while I give those reds a check."

"Do not spare the spur, either."

It was Wild Bill who gave the order to Lieutenant Harry Lockwood, when they discovered that they were being pursued by the Indians.

"But, Bill, I will not leave you to fight alone," said the young officer.

"Nonsense, lieutenant, for I am well mounted; Black Diamond is not jaded as your horses are, and I have a rifle here which will do better service than all the carbines your boys have."

"I will soon follow, so push on hard!"

Thus urged, Harry Lockwood held on his way, while Wild Bill halted behind a bowlder and awaited the coming of the Indians, who were yelling like demons, confident of their power to overtake the little band of troopers and easily annihilate them.

To follow upon the trail of the soldiers they must bring themselves under the fire of Wild Bill at long range, as soon as they left the heavy timber of the hills.

Watching closely, Wild Bill soon discovered them dash into view.

First came a large white horse, and upon his back was a Sioux, in all the feathers and paraphernalia of a chief.

"I knew that they must be the Sioux band, encamped at the other end of the canyon; but I do not see the Blackfoot among them," he said, as two-score of warriors, all seemingly well mounted, dashed into sight, following their chief.

"I wonder if I hit Fighting Crow?"

"I must have done so, or he certainly would have been with these Sioux; but he is not there."

"It was a long way off that I shot at him, and he was jumping about like a jack-rabbit; but I guess I hit him, as I do not see him."

"Now I'll try a long-range shot on your Sioux chief."

As he spoke Wild Bill brought his rifle round for use, adjusted the long-range sights, and threw the butt to his shoulder.

An instant he ran his eye along the sight, and then his finger touched the trigger.

The crack of the rifle came, and a second after the chief on the white horse was seen to throw up his hands, reel, and nearly fall from his saddle.

"Ha, by Heaven! He is held in the saddle by a man behind him!" cried Wild Bill, as he saw a pair of arms clasped about the waist of the Sioux chief.

Again he threw the rifle to his shoulder, and as the Indians had halted in a group, he had a better aim.

Once more the weapon cracked, and, as the large white horse sprung forward, the chief dropped from his back to the ground.

"The Blackfoot was behind him, by Heaven!" and the scout broke forth in his ringing war-cry, while the Indians, unheeding Fighting Crow's urging them on, broke in wild confusion and rode back to the shelter of the timber.

Seeing that he was left alone, and wishing to distinguish himself before his new-found friends, the Sioux, Fighting Crow, rode to where the body of the chief lay, dismounted coolly, and threw him across the saddle, giving the animal at the same time a blow which started him for the timber at a gallop.

A yell of admiration from the Sioux greeted this act of daring, and Wild Bill, who had mounted to ride on, turned to see the cause.

"I'll quicken your pace, Mr. Crow," he said, as he raised his rifle to his shoulder.

But Black Diamond was a trifle restless, being anxious to follow on after the troopers, Fighting Crow was moving, though in a slow, defiant walk, and the distance was great, and increasing at every step the red-skin took.

Under these disadvantageous circumstances shot after shot flashed from the scout's rifle without effect upon the daring red-skin, although the bullets were seen to spatter the mud upon him and from about his feet.

"You're a cool one, Crow, and will yet run the Sioux tribe if you keep on as you've started," muttered Wild Bill, as he gave again one of his awe-inspiring war-cries, and rode on after Lieutenant Lockwood and his men.

Hardly had he started before he saw Fighting Crow dash out of the timber, mounted upon the Sioux chief's white horse, while at his back were a score of warriors.

"He already leads them! Well, if he crowds me I'll send him to join his Sioux ally, whom the rest of the band are now burying back in the timber," and Wild Bill rode at a swift pace, to again seek a good halting-place, where he would be sheltered if the red-skins charged him.

A ravine was soon come to, and here he again halted, to once more turn upon the Indians a few shots from his rifle.

He fired half a dozen shots with wonderful rapidity and without dismounting, and could not suppress a yell of triumph as he brought down the white horse which Fighting Crow rode, and dropped an under chief from his pony.

But Fighting Crow was upon his feet in an instant, and springing upon the back of the animal, which death had just caused his rider to desert, he again urged the Sioux to follow him in a charge.

But that death-dealing rifle was too much for their nerves, and they hung back so that the Blackfoot had another Sioux warrior to bear from the field under the fire of the scout.

"That Blackfoot bears a charmed life, and I've but served to promote him," muttered Wild Bill, as he again rode after the retreating soldiers.

Coming up with them, he laughingly called out:

"Killed two, lieutenant; but as I have no scalps to show, of course you don't believe me."

"Yes, Bill, for you are not one of the kind who has to bring in a scalp to show that he has seen a dead Indian."

"But are they coming?"

"I think not, sir, for they are getting too near the fort; but your Blackfoot pard is the High-Mucky-Muck of the band now," and Wild Bill told how Fighting Crow had behaved, while he added:

"That young warrior means business, and he'll soon make the Blackfeet weep for their queen, if I mistake not."

"You think he will seek an opportunity to kill the girl?"

"No, lieutenant, he will seek an opportunity to capture her and make her his wife; but she has white blood in her, and will show her claws in such a way that he will find her a hard shrew to tame; but see, yonder in the valley lies the flag over Camp Comfort, so that we are safe."

At sight of the Stars and Stripes, though yet far away, floating over the post, the troopers burst forth in a long, ringing cheer, in which their officer and Wild Bill readily joined them, and an hour after they were welcomed with loud hurrahs as they rode into the garrison of Camp Comfort, for, seeing Wild Bill in their midst, the soldiers felt that Lieutenant Lockwood had accomplished his mission, which was to find the scout, for they knew not then that the scout had found the troopers.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LOST TRAIL.

AFTER the hardships and perils through which they had passed, Wild Bill and Black Diamond certainly needed and deserved rest.

But the scout was no man to think of himself when work was to be done, and he quickly made his report to Colonel Burr, who listened to all with the deepest attention.

"And you think that Colorado King is dead, Hickok?" asked the colonel.

"How can it be otherwise, colonel, after the terrific leap that he took from the bridge?"

"How deep was the ravine?"

"About a hundred feet, I should judge, sir."

"And the bottom?"

"Was a foaming torrent, with rocks here and there."

"Well, then I shall count him as dead, and with Colorado King out of the way, we will have little to dread from the outlaw band."

"True, colonel, the Buckskin Bravos will have no such leader as was Colorado King; but then they are a brave lot of men and should be looked after at once, while they are demoralized by the loss of their chief, and those I killed, not to speak of the two who are captives to the Blackfoot Queen, and will be a picnic for the tribe when they get them there."

"One of those fellows, from your account, is a daring man."

"Yes, colonel; Barney, they call him, and he is a plucky one."

"In fact, were he to escape from the red-skins I do not doubt but that he would make a leader only second to what Colorado King was."

"There is no danger of his escape."

"He is a slippery fellow, sir, and there is no telling; but, should he do so, it would squelch him to find that the Buckskin Bravos had been wiped out, and he would be left without a band to work with."

"Then you suggest that I send a force at once to the retreat of the Bravos?"

"Yes, sir, before they have had time to rally, for Duff Scott, an army deserter, is with them, and he would not make a bad commander."

"But you are too much used up to go off again for a day or two, Hickok."

"No, Colonel Burr, I am ready to start within the hour; but I shall give Black Diamond a rest, and ride another horse."

"Well, Hickok, I will send Captain Ames at once with his company, and you can lead them."

"As you need a good horse take my roan, for he wants exercise."

Wild Bill thanked the colonel and departed to make his arrangements for the march.

An hour after he rode out of the garrison by the side of Captain Ames, who had at his back fifty cavalymen, while Harry Lockwood waved them farewell with a sad face at the thought that he could not go on account of his wounds.

The first act of Wild Bill was to strike the trail they had made in coming into the camp, and then follow it to the spot where he had fired his two fatal shots at the Sioux.

Taking the trail of the Indians from here he led the troopers rapidly along until nightfall, and being near the camp of their foes a halt was called.

Then the scout went off on foot, and an hour after returned with the information that the Indian camp was well situated for a surprise, and that they seemed to little dread an attack from the soldiers.

Mounting his men once more the captain set off on the march, and Wild Bill led them to a spot where the camp-fires of the Indians were visible.

It had come on to snow, and the night was dark and cold; but the troopers had work before them that would soon warm them up. Wild Bill told them, and with a cheer that aroused the Indian sentinel, from the shelter of a friendly tree, where he had retreated from the storm, they charged down upon the camp.

Then came the clatter of hoofs, the snorting of horses, cheers of the soldiers, and startling cries and war-whoops of the red-skins.

Next came the rattle of revolvers, and the camp was surprised, the battle was begun and quickly ended, for seeing such a large force charging down upon them the red-skins at once darted to the timber and rocks for shelter, leaving a dozen dead about the camp-fires.

A trooper had fallen, and several had been too severely wounded to proceed, so with the captured ponies of the red-skins Captain Ames at once sent them off to the fort under an escort of ten men and a guide, with orders to push right through with all haste.

Camping about the Indian fires the remainder of the command passed the night, while the fugitive Sioux in small parties were seeking safety in flight.

Several times had Wild Bill caught sight of Fighting Crow, and he it was that had killed the one trooper slain, and done all in his power to make the Sioux stand firm.

But, though Wild Bill had gotten a seemingly fair shot at the Blackfoot, he had not brought him down, but saw him drag a cavalymen from his horse, mount and dash away.

At dawn the troopers pressed on for the retreat of the Buckskin Bravos in the face of a cold, driving rain, into which the snow-storm of the night before had turned.

All through the day they continued their dreary march through ice, mud and swollen streams, until just before nightfall they reached the vicinity of the bridge.

As it touched the horizon the sun burst through the clouds, which soon after drifted away, leaving the skies clear and twinkling with stars.

Then to the bridge Wild Bill led the men, and crossing on foot cautiously first, he saw that it had not been tampered with, as he had feared it would be.

With much trepidation men and horses crossed the frail-looking span between the two banks, awed by the dizzy height, and the roaring of the waters beneath their feet, and all led their animals over, where Wild Bill had boldly ridden across, to the admiration of the soldiers, whose idol he was.

Then on the way to the retreat he led them past the scene of his capture of the guard by playing ghost, on by the spot where he had himself seen the sergeant deserter, Duff Scott, playing specter, and thence up the canyon which he knew led to the stronghold, though he had never been there.

But up the canyon they went, finding no guard, and then search proving in vain, they were forced to camp until daylight.

Not daring to light fires, the men rolled themselves in their blankets and sought rest and what comfort they could find until the dawn called them to their saddles.

Then Wild Bill led them on once more, and the deserted camp of the Buckskin Bravos was found.

It was a large log cabin, built to serve as a garrison and fort; but it was utterly deserted, and had been evidently for a couple of days.

The log stables were near by, with a sheltered way leading to them, but they, too, were desolate.

"Now, Bill, what is to be done?" said Captain Ames.

"The birds have flown, sir, and the storm of yesterday has utterly destroyed all trace of them, so their trail is lost," was the reply.

"This is too bad; but our trip was by no means fruitless, as we gained one fight with the Sioux, so let us return to the fort, as this spring weather is enough to make all the men sick," returned the captain.

As the trail of the Buckskin Bravos was utterly lost, there was nothing to do but to retrace their way, and once more the bridge was crossed in safety.

"Captain Ames, I have an idea that the Bravos have not deserted these Hills, or they never would have left that bridge," said Wild Bill.

"Then I will have it destroyed."

"Oh, no, sir, for it may be as useful to us at some time as to them."

"But as they have disappeared, I shall take the time for a run East to the States for a couple of weeks."

"What! you go East, Hickok?" asked the officer, in surprise.

"Yes, sir, for I have a duty to perform which I cannot neglect longer, as I gave a dying woman my pledge to do it."

"Ah, yes, you refer to the poor woman whom Colorado King killed, and of whom the colonel told me in confidence?"

"Yes, sir, I have her gold hidden in the Hills, and I shall go and tell her daughter of the death of her parents, and ask her to send some one here in the summer to whom I can deliver the dust."

"You are a noble fellow, Bill, and success attend you; but if the heiress is pretty, get her to return with you for her gold, as there are half a dozen officers who would like to look after it for her," said Captain Ames, with a light laugh.

"If she cares to return with me, captain, I will gladly take her to her mother's grave, poor girl, while, if she has not already a lover, I can recommend a splendid fellow at the post who would make her a good husband—Lieutenant Lockwood, for instance," and Wild Bill looked slyly at the handsome bachelor captain, who was nearing two-score years too rapidly for his own comfort.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ANOTHER LOST TRAIL.

THE spring certainly opened up with considerable excitement at Camp Comfort, from the unexpected return of Wild Bill, whom all had believed dead, to the return of Captain Ames with his party, to report the flight of the Buckskin Bravos from their retreat.

There was regret for the men who had lost their lives, but the feeling that they had met but a soldier's fate.

There was sympathy for the wounded, and a general hope that the band of Buckskin Bravos had been driven from the trails to the Hills, by the death of Colorado King, and would no longer be heard of in those parts.

As for Wild Bill, feeling assured there would be little service done, either in scouting, or the movements of emigrants and miners into the Hills until late in the spring, he was anxious to go to Chicago and keep his pledge made to poor Mrs. Courtney.

After his return with Captain Ames he asked for a leave of a few weeks, and most readily the colonel granted it, adding:

"And Hickok, we will let them believe that you have left the post altogether, so that any of the villains who wish to show their hands, and stand in awe of you, will soon do so, and upon your return you can give them a surprise, for I do not half think that the Buckskin Bravos will leave the trails to the mines without a far severer lesson than they have had."

"It may be as you say, colonel; but if the Bravos do take the trail, it will be under the leadership of the deserter sergeant, or Barney, should he escape from the red-skins, for there is no other man in the band that has the nerve and brain to lead them."

"Anyhow, a few weeks will tell what they will do, and if they do make a break, I will ask your permission to devote the summer to running them to earth."

"You shall do it, Bill, and have all the men you may desire to aid you, for, as long

as I command up here, I shall wage war against the class of men who come here to rob, murder and cause trouble.

"But when do you start?"

"To-night, sir."

"And will strike for Cheyenne, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you wish an escort?"

"No, indeed, sir, I thank you," and Wild Bill soon after rode alone out of the camp, having bidden his comrades farewell, to give the idea that he was going to depart wholly from the post.

Arriving at the nearest point where he could reach the railroad, he left Black Diamond in safe hands and bought his ticket for Chicago.

Arriving in that city without adventure, the scout sought a fashionable hotel, and after registering, set out to rig himself up in more presentable attire.

"I guess I won't shock the poor girl now with my looks," he said, as he surveyed in a full-length mirror the very elegantly dressed and handsome man he had become under the hands of a tailor, boot-maker, hatter and barber.

And Wild Bill had reason to feel that he would not shock poor Clarice Courtney, the orphan girl, with his appearance, for he was the observed of all observers, and there was that in his handsome, daring face that showed the reader of human nature that he was a man with a history.

Looking into the wallet given him by Mrs. Courtney, Bill jotted down the address of the orphan girl, and getting into a carriage drove there.

He found it outwardly a cosy-looking house, upon one of the pleasant streets of the great western metropolis, and to his question if Miss Clarice Courtney dwelt there, the servant answered:

"Yes, sir, but she is not at home."

"Indeed! then I will call again, if you will tell me when she will be in," he said, in his courtly way.

"I will ask the madam, sir, if you will walk in."

Wild Bill did so, and entering the parlor his eyes fell upon the portrait of a lovely girl of eighteen hanging over the mantle.

There was something in the sadly beautiful face which seemed to fascinate him, and he wondered where he had met the original, for the countenance was certainly most familiar.

Then into the parlor came a lady, who bowed to the handsome stranger, and asked:

"Did you call to see my niece, Miss Courtney, sir?"

"Yes, madam."

"I am Mrs. Raymond, sir, the aunt of Miss Courtney, and if you have any communication for her you can let me know, for she is absent in the West at present."

"In the West, madam?" asked Bill, quickly.

"Yes, sir, she started a week ago to visit her parents, who are somewhere in the Black Hills."

It was not often that Wild Bill was thrown off his equal balance, but now he said excitedly:

"Great God! I would that I had come sooner!"

"Ah, sir, have you aught of trouble and sorrow to tell?" and the lady looked Wild Bill squarely in the face.

"Yes, madam, I am the bearer of ill news to Miss Courtney."

"Ill news? Quick, sir, tell me of my brother and his wife!" cried the lady in alarm.

"I am sorry to tell you, Mrs. Raymond, that both your brother, Mr. Carr Courtney and his wife are dead."

"Dead! dead! they are dead?" and Mrs. Raymond sunk into a chair, burying her face in her hands, while the scout stood gazing upon her in deep pity, and determined that he would not then make known the manner of the death met by the miner and his wife.

After a moment Mrs. Raymond gained her self-control, and said:

"Oh, sir, this is sad, sad tidings that you bring to me, and bitter will be the blow to poor Clarice."

"My brother left here to seek his fortune in the mines, and striking a vein that paid

him well, he wrote to his wife to join him there.

"She left their child, Clarice, with me, and went to him, and they had sent large sums of money to her, and hoped soon to return to Chicago very rich."

"Then a letter came from Kate, saying that her husband was not well, and their departure would be delayed until this spring."

"Next followed a messenger, that Clarice must go to her parents, and she started a week ago under his charge."

Again Wild Bill started, and asked quickly:

"A messenger came for her, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was he?"

"A tall, handsome man, not unlike yourself, sir; he said he was a miner, and friend of my brother and his wife."

"Did he give his name?"

"Yes, his name was Clarence Carson."

"Clarence Carson! I do not know the name; but I assure you, Mrs. Raymond, that I suspect deviltry here."

"Do you see this wallet?"

"Yes, and it was my brother's, for I worked his name upon it years ago."

"Well, madam, this was given to me by Mrs. Courtney when she was dying, and at that time I made her a pledge that I would do as she bade me."

"Her husband died in the mines some two weeks before her death, and she was upon her way, with others, to return East."

"She had with her a large sum of gold, which she was bringing home with her, and those with her had their fortunes, too."

"But a guide, one in whom they trusted, led them on a false trail, got them lost, and let them starve and freeze to death that he might get their gold."

"Oh, Heaven have mercy!" groaned Mrs. Raymond.

"I saw their trail and followed it, arriving upon the scene to see what the guide had done."

"But enough, she died, and he, believing that he had killed me, hid the gold to return for it in the spring."

"But I was not seriously wounded, and recovered, and thwarted the villain by hiding the gold elsewhere."

"I came to Chicago to give Miss Courtney the gold I pledged myself to deliver to her, and you tell me that she has gone West."

"Yes, oh, yes; and the man she went with told such a plausible story, too."

"Mrs. Raymond, I am a Government scout, and there are a hundred officers of the army in this city who will vouch for me, if you ask them who Wild Bill is."

"Ah! I have heard of you, sir, if you are the famous Wild Bill."

"Why, Kate has written of the famous scout of that name."

"I am Wild Bill Hickok, Mrs. Raymond, and I tell you frankly that I fear deviltry in this departure of your niece."

"Clarence Carson, I never heard of; but I shall find out about him, and if there has been wrong done, I pledge you my word, as I pledged it to that poor woman who died in the snow, that I will right that wrong."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BUCK LEE'S PASSENGERS.

It was the first stage through into the Hills since the breaking up of the winter, and Buck Lee mounted his box and took the ribbons with the air of a man who had great responsibility resting upon him.

"I guesses you won't have no trouble now with road-agents, Buck," said the landlord of the tavern at the station, handing up to the driver a handful of cigars.

"Thar's no tellin', lan'lor', for road-agents is like snakes; thar is no knowin' when they is dead, an' I expects ther Buckskin Bravos will be on ther trails ag'in now that it are known thet Wild Bill hev left for the Southern plains," answered Buck Lee, who did not wish the danger of the trip he had to make, made little of.

"Is that so, driver?" asked a tall, well-dressed man, with a long beard and fiery eyes, as he came out of the tavern, escorting a lady who wore a heavy veil which hid her face.

"Are what so, pard?" asked Buck Lee.

"That Wild Bill has gone to the Southern plains."

"Yes, pard, he left some two weeks ago, havin' orders, I heerd, ter report ter New Mexico, and I is sorry for it, as the Buckskin Bravos will doubtless make it lively for ther hearses thet travel ther trails to the Hills now."

"Yes, from all accounts, Wild Bill is a wonderful man; but I hope you dread no trouble on this trip, as I have a lady with me that I would not have alarmed by a halt from road-agents."

"Waal, this are the first trip up, an' I guesses we'll git through all right; but ef gold begins ter travel ther trails as lively as it did last year, thar will allus be found men ter take life chances ter git it, and don't you fergit it."

"Now, stranger, I am ready ter say git, so jist climb inter ther hearse an' we'll be off."

Thus advised the stranger sprung lightly into the coach, the door was closed with a bang, the whip cracked, and the stage to the Black Hills rolled away from the station at a lively pace.

There were but two passengers in the stage, and they were the gentleman and lady before referred to.

The former was certainly a superb-looking man, perhaps forty years of age, yet looking younger.

The lady, when she took off her thick veil, was seen to be a young girl, scarcely over seventeen, and very beautiful, with large, lustrous eyes and an innocent face that was most fascinating in its childlike loveliness.

Her form, as she threw off her wrap, was slender, yet well matured, and her every action was graceful.

She was dressed in a gray traveling dress, black over-jacket, and soft hat with a sable feather, while her hands and feet were small, shapely, and well gloved and booted.

A heavy shawl and sachel lay upon the front seat, and upon the latter in gilt letters was the name:

"CLARICE COURTNEY."

Her companion was, as I have said, well dressed, and, as he threw open his heavy traveling-coat, after entering the stage, a belt was visible about his waist, and it contained a pair of silver-mounted revolvers and a bowie-knife, while there was that in the man's face which indicated that he both could and would use them if need be.

"And we will have to spend two days and a night in this cumbersome vehicle, Mr. Carson?" asked the maiden, with a look that showed the prospect was not very inviting to her.

"Yes, Miss Clarice; but then your journey is at an end, and you will be repaid for the hardship by seeing your parents," was the answer.

"And oh! how glad will I be to see them; but what you tell me of my father's illness makes me very blue."

"I hope for the best."

"Yes, and so do I, Mr. Carson; but then I feel very blue, and my heart seems heavy, as though from coming trouble."

"You must shake that feeling off, Miss Clarice, for, should your father be taken from you, you will have yet your good mother to love and care for you, and besides, you will be an heiress."

"I care little for money, Mr. Carson."

"Why, when father sent East his first gold find I was only glad for him and poor mamma's sake, as they once had been rich, and it was so hard for them to be poor, I knew."

"Yet you are not sorry that you are an heiress?"

"No, for I hope to do good with my money."

"I have been most kindly cared for by my aunt, and we were very happy at her home, though she was not rich."

"I love her and my uncle Raymond dearly, and though I had not my parents near me, I felt that they were content together and doing so well that we should all be united soon."

The man gazed in silence at the lovely girl as she was speaking, and then said quietly:

"And may I ask if your father has been able to send much of his gold East?"

"Yes, he sent five different sums amount-

ing to considerably over one hundred thousand dollars."

"I hope, for your sake, that he invested it well?"

"He left it to me to invest as uncle Raymond thought best, and I bought United States bonds and put them in the bank."

"I am glad that your father had such a large sum to his credit."

"Oh! that is mine, you know, and all banked in my name; his fortune and mamma's they wrote they would bring with them."

"Yes, and they have accumulated a snug sum since then, I assure you, and you will be a rich catch to the man whom you love."

"I do not love any man, Mr. Carson, and when I do, I hope to be a rich catch for my personal virtues rather than my gold," was the quiet response.

"And I assure you that you will be, for I have learned to admire you for myself, far more than I dare tell you, Clarice."

"But, alas! I fear my dream of the future will be broken," and the man sighed, while the face of Clarice Courtney flushed, and she remained silent, for the almost avowal of love from his lips gave her no pleasure, but pain.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN THE SPIDER'S WEB.

BUCK LEE'S "hearse," as he called his coach affectionately, rolled slowly on its way, for the trail was a hard and rough one.

Through the day and the following night, with occasional changing of horses, and a ruder jostling than usual now and then, to break the monotony, it went on toward its destination.

Now and then a "pilgrim," as the driver called his passengers, would get in at one station and ride to another; but, excepting these few transient travelers, Mr. Carson and his fair companion were not disturbed.

The man was most kind and attentive to the maiden, and with cushions, the sachels and her shawl had made her most comfortable upon the back seat, where she slept serenely during the night, excepting when jostled into wide-awakefulness by the rough roads.

With a flask of brandy and some cigars as companions, Mr. Carson climbed to the box with Buck Lee, who at once hid the half-smoked weed he was indulging in, when his passenger called out to him that he would ride with him.

"Do you smoke?" asked Carson, as he took a seat by his side.

"I does when I gits the chance, which are seldom," was the ready lie in response.

"Perhaps you'll have a cigar?"

"P'raps I will, stranger, ef it's a good weed, fer bad terbacky makes me sick."

The cigar-case was offered, with a double row of Havanas in it, as the coach-lights revealed.

"Is they all the same kind?" asked Buck.

"No, these are strong, and those mild."

"I'll take one of each ter see which I likes best."

This Buck did, and then came the question:

"Before you light your cigar, perhaps you'll take a drink?"

"Of what?"

"Brandy."

"P'raps I will, if I gits ther chance."

"Well, you shall have the chance, my man," and the flask, a quart, was drawn out.

"Are it whisky?"

"No, brandy."

"I never drinks brandy, but rather than make you mad I'll do it this time," and Buck grasped the flask, but Mr. Carson said quietly:

"See, here is a silver cup on the bottom of the flask which you can use."

"Oh, I see," and Buck looked disappointed that he had not been able to take a "swallow" by "the word of mouth," for then the size of the swallow would not have been visible.

"Pour out fer me, pard," said the driver, and he added:

"I'll tell you *when*."

Mr. Carson began to pour out the liquor, when Buck suddenly found it necessary to touch up one of his leaders, and forgot to say *when*.

"It is full, so I had to stop pouring."

"Waal now, jist pour about half of it back ag'in—no, no, yer needn't mind ter do that, as it will hev ter be poured out ag'in," and Buck Lee dashed off the brandy with a smack that showed considerable relish for a liquor he never drank, as he had said.

The cigars were then lighted, and the heart of Buck Lee had been wholly won over by the passenger.

As the relays had not been yet all placed along the stage trail, Buck Lee had to drive clear through on this first trip, and halts were called of five hours each day and night for rest and refreshment.

It was just dawn when the coach pulled into a wayside station, and the much-needed rest was sought.

After five hours the coach again started upon the trail, and Carson now rode inside to entertain Clarice, and a most entertaining companion she found him, too, for he had seen much of the world evidently, and was a good story-teller, while his manners were courtly and pleasing.

The agent at the last station had told Buck Lee that there had been some suspicious-looking characters about of late, and that he might be halted, so the driver was constantly on the alert for danger.

Just as he had reached the summit of a long hill the much dreaded summons rung out sharp and stern:

"Halt that hearse, pard!"

Buck Lee was no coward, and before he obeyed he was determined to see just who and how many were to be dealt with, so he held on without drawing rein, while he dropped his right hand to the revolver in a holster back of the seat.

"Do you hear?"

"Halt that team!"

This time the voice sounded in deadly earnest, and, as Buck still held on, there came the crack of a revolver and a bullet splintered the edge of the coach near the driver.

"Halt it are!" cried Buck, putting his foot on the brake and reining up.

"I thought you would understand pistol English, pard," cried a man stepping out from the thicket near by and covering the driver with a revolver, while at his back came half a dozen followers, all armed with rifles, and having about their waists belts of arms.

They were dressed in buckskin hunting-shirts, beaded and fringed, leggings, stuck in the tops of military boots, and wore white slouch hats.

A wild, reckless-looking set of men they certainly were, and at a glance Buck Lee seemed to recognize them, for he called out to his passengers:

"Buckskin Bravos, pilgrims, an' we is done for."

"Yes; we are the Buckskin Bravos, driver, and we want toll," was the reply of the man who appeared to be the leader.

"Did yer ever see a driver as hed dust ter throw away on road-agents?" asked Buck, in a tone of disgust.

"We do not want your gold, but you have a fortune in your old hearse that we want."

"I is goin' ther wrong way ter be carryin' gold, pard."

"You carry two passengers, driver."

"Yer don't want them?"

"Yes."

"Does yer mean it?"

"I do."

"You mean their gold?"

"If I take them I'll get their gold," was the reply.

"One is a leddy."

"So much the better."

"Better let up on 'em, pard, an' maybe they'll hand out ther dust liberal."

"No!" and the leader of the Buckskin Bravos stepped up to the stage-door and threw it open.

"Well, sir, what do you want?" and the Bravo was covered by a revolver held in the hand of Mr. Carson, while Clarice, shutting out the sight with her hands over her face, cried:

"Oh, do not kill him!"

The leader seemed for an instant to be taken aback, but then he said, calmly:

"Your little game of bluff doesn't scare me, Mr. Carson, for I have my hand at my back, and your death would at once follow harm to me."

"Yes, pard, we has yer covered," cried one of the men, and then Buck Lee called out:

"Thar is nine of 'em, guv'nor, one with a weepin on me, an' seven of 'em hes you under aim, so yer better give in quiet."

"Good advice, driver, and I will follow it under the circumstances."

"Well, Sir Bravo, what is your will?" calmly said Mr. Carson, returning his revolver to his belt.

"We want you and the lady to go with us," was the cool reply.

And in vain was all their entreaty, for the Bravos were firm, and leaving the stage, Mr. Carson and poor Clarice mounted horses, led forward for them from the thicket, and Buck Lee drove on alone and in deep distress for the fate of his passengers, who had been entangled in the spider's web.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A CURIOUS PRIEST.

THOUGH he had fallen from grace in a measure, at heart Buck Lee was a good Catholic, and had great reverence for his church and all connected with it.

As he had explained, when making known how it was he had "joined the church," he had been "caught on the fly."

A worthy priest had come to the camps where Buck was then a miner, and the pictures he had drawn of damnation to the wicked had scared the bordermen into repentance, and many converts had been made in the mines.

Finding that he could do better at stage-driving than at gold-digging, Buck had taken to that occupation, and it was not very long before he had to admit that it was very hard for an Overland driver not to swear.

At first he began with the photograph, as it were, of oaths, such as, "Confound it!" "Holy Rockies!" "Durnation!" and such; but these were soon cast aside for unadulterated profanity, and "tangle-foot" followed cold water as a beverage, until Buck said:

"Ef I were ter see a priest now, I are so sinful, I wouldn't dare look a jack-rabbit in the face."

What, therefore, was Buck Lee's horror, upon returning on the down trip, when only a few miles from where he had been halted by the road-agents, to see a horseman approaching, and recognized in him a holy father.

He had been telling the sutler of Camp Comfort, who sat on the box with him, about losing his passengers on his up-trip, and fearing that they might see the Bravos on their way back.

But they had passed the scene of the former adventure, and Buck was congratulating himself upon his escape, when his eyes fell upon the horseman in the distance.

"Step-son o' Moses! thar's ther devil, now!" cried Buck.

But an instant after he discovered his mistake and cried out, at the same time crossing himself as a look of horror stole over his face.

"Moses in Egypt! but it are a holy father, and I took him fer a road-agent devil."

"Yes, it is a priest," said the sutler.

"An' ef I hed ther chance I'd turn about an' drive up some canyon until he went by, fer I don't recomber a Latin pra'er, as I are a backslidin' sinner."

"Well, you'll have to face him this time, Buck, and maybe he won't ask you about your prayers."

"I hope not, fer ef I hed ter confess he'd find life too durned short ter listen ter me."

A few moments after the horseman approached the vehicle, and between crossing himself and muttering oaths because his brake wouldn't work well, Buck Lee had some difficulty in coming to a standstill at the motion of the priest for him to do so.

"Good-morning, my son; are you going to the railroad station?" asked the priest.

"Thet is whar I'm p'inted, father, an' I hopes to git thar."

"Have you met with any wicked men upon the highway, my son?"

"Not a durned one until I met you, father— Step-son o' Moses, keep still!" yelled Buck, to his restive team, little dreaming how he had hit the priest a terrible rap by his words, and which caused his reverence to smile.

"I mean, are there any road-agents about?"

"I hain't seen none this trip down, father; but going up they tackled me."

"Ahl and robbed your coach?"

"Thar wasn't no dust on board for 'em to take; but they yanked out two pilgrims as was going up to ther mines."

"Indeed!"

"Fact, father."

"They took two passengers?"

"Yes, father."

"They did not kill them, I hope?"

"They tuk 'em off with 'em inter the hills."

"Do you know who they were?"

"Buckskin Bravos, every durned one of 'em, begging yer pardon fer lettin' ther leetle profane slip out."

"I mean who were the passengers?"

"A gent as was as squar' as a acre, an' a gal thet were good fer ther eyes ter look onto."

"A gentleman and a lady?"

"Thet are so."

"Do you know their names?"

"She calt him Mr. Carson, and he calt her Miss suthin'-er-other, which I fergits, but guesses it were a Frenchified name."

"Ahl!"

"Fact, father."

"And the robbers kidnapped them?"

"Waal, yer sh'ud hev seen 'em do it."

"Did not the gentleman resist?"

"Nary resist, fer they hed him covered."

"Where was this?"

"Back up the trail a mile."

"Who was the leader of the robbers?"

"A big feller ther men calt Sergeant Duff."

"Did they seem to know the gentleman in the coach?"

"Waal, I does remember that they calt him by the name o' Carson, an' it were evident thet they was posted thet he were coming."

"Thank you, my son, and I will not detain you longer," and the priest rode on, while Buck said to the sutler:

"Now, pard, thet are ther daisy o' a father, fer he didn't ask me about my sins, tho' he were almighty cur'us about them Bravos an' ther passengers."

"But if he hev undertook ter convert ther heathens in these Hills, he hev bit off a bigger bite then he kin chaw, fer them Buckskin Bravos w'ud rob him o' his spec's an' prafferbook, or I doesn't know tha'r sinful hearts."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BUCKSKIN BRAVOS' CAPTIVES.

WHEN Clarice Courtney was forced to go with the Buckskin Bravos, she would have utterly broken down with alarm but for the presence of her fellow-prisoner, Mr. Carson.

He had spoken to her in a tone that reassured her in a measure, and as the two rode side by side together, they talked over their misfortune.

Before them, just out of earshot, rode Sergeant Duff, the leader of the Bravos, and whom the reader will remember as the man who played ghost, and got captured by Wild Bill.

Behind them followed the eight men of the band, two of them carrying the baggage of the captives.

Leaving the stage-road, the sergeant had taken a trail leading directly into the most isolated parts of the mountains, and the solitude about them impressed Clarice deeply.

"They seemed to know you, for they called you by name, Mr. Carson," said Clarice to her companion.

"Yes, I observed that fact, and more, it seems as though they expected both you and myself, for they had a lady's saddle for you, as you see."

"Oh, what can it mean?" cried the maiden.

"I suppose some evil man in the mines, knowing that your parents had sent me for you, told these Buckskin Bravos, with whom he may be in league, of our coming, and they have thus been able to lay a trap for us."

"But for what reason?"

"For ransom."

"I have not much money with me, as I did not deem it necessary to bring a large

sum; but what I have, and my jewelry, they can have, if they will only let us go."

"Ah, Clarice, it is no small sum that these men have kidnapped us for."

"But I have not any more, and I remember you said you had lost what you had."

"Yes, but they will demand a large ransom."

"Yet it cannot be paid."

"My child, you forget that your parents are in the Black Hills and that they have accumulated a large sum."

"Ah yes, I had forgotten that."

"So they will demand the money of my parents?"

"Such is my idea."

"And they will get it, for my father would give his last dollar to ransom me from the power of such men."

"Sh! do not let them hear you, or they will demand the last dollar your father can raise."

"Well, I am glad it is only a loss of money, and that we are in no peril for our lives."

"You certainly value money very little, Miss Courtney."

"Why should I value it more?" was the innocent response.

"How far is it from here to the camp of my parents?" asked Clarice, as her companion made no rejoinder to her last remark.

"About sixty miles."

"And they will take us there?"

"Oh no! they will take us to their stronghold and then enter into negotiations for your ransom."

"And yours."

"They will get little from me, Miss Courtney, for I have only a few hundreds laid up."

"My father will arrange your ransom with mine, for it is by your kindness to me, and to my parents, that you have gotten into this trouble, and I would not accept my freedom without you also being set at liberty."

"You are a noble woman, Clarice Courtney," said Mr. Carson, earnestly.

"I would be an ignoble one did I act otherwise."

"I thank you, and I hope all will come out well."

"I hope so, and when the chief of these evil men speaks to me upon the subject of ransom, I will write to my father to give up all, if need be, and let us fly from this hateful land, for what I have at home will be a fortune for us."

"I should think so, as you say it is over a hundred thousand dollars; but we will know their intentions to-night, for their stronghold must be near here."

For a number of miles more they continued their way, now and then talking together, and then riding on in silence.

Toward sunset the leader turned into a trail leading straight up the mountain-side, and in single file the others followed him.

It was a hard, steep climb for the horses, of a mile, or more, and Clarice observed as they ascended that they were going up what appeared to be a cone-like mountain, standing separated from the ranges round about, and higher than any ridge near.

The sides, in the far-back past, seemed as though at some time the mountain might have been a volcano, hurling from its summit immense rocks, for the hill was so broken up everywhere that only in the trail, which was zigzag to a wonderful degree, could an ascent be made.

At last the panting horses reached the summit, and the captives saw before them a space of several acres, dotted with trees, and with a carpet of luxuriant grass at their feet.

The view was superb upon all sides, and the ridge seemed like a fort made by Nature, for upon each slant of the hill were obstructions that could not be passed going down or coming up, and by the trail they had come only was the place accessible.

In the shelter of the trees stood several cabins built of stone, with log frames for the doors and windows, and before them bubbled up a crystal spring.

Horses were wandering about feeding upon the grass, which grew in vast abundance, and in front of the cabins sat half a dozen men clad in buckskin.

Riding up to one of the rock huts which

stood apart from the others, Sergeant Duff said quietly:

"Here, miss, this will be your home for the present, and you have the free use of the fort, as we call our roost, for you cannot get away."

Turning to Mr. Carson he continued:

"You, sir, can bunk in with the men."

"All right, my man; but for how long are we to remain prisoners in this mountain pass?" answered Mr. Carson.

"I cannot say now, sir; but to-night we will talk it over, and your stay will depend upon yourself, for we have made a rich haul in you and the lady, and we intend it shall pan out well," and Sergeant Duff walked away, while Mr. Carson aided Clarice from her saddle and led her into the rude hut which she was told was to be her home.

A cot, a table and a chair, with a few cooking utensils was all the furniture the place had, and the tears rose in the beautiful eyes of the young girl as she felt the awful desolation and helplessness of her situation there among that band of reckless outlaws.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A PRIEST ON THE WAR-PATH.

AFTER the stage rolled on, the priest, of whom Buck Lee, the driver, had stood in such holy awe, rode quietly along until he came to the scene of the halting of the coach two days before.

As described to him by the driver, he had little difficulty in placing the spot, and he dismounted and looked about him with the air of one who knew what he was about.

He was dressed in clerical clothes, and wore the look of one who could save souls and at the same time take care of himself.

His complexion was very dark, as though he had passed long years under a burning sun, or perhaps had been born in a sunny Southern land.

There was a fullness about his coat over the breast, upon either side, that suggested the idea of well-filled pockets, for excepting a blanket at the back of his saddle, he seemed to carry no luggage.

After examining the tracks about the stage road for some time, he walked back to his horse, which was by no means a showy animal, yet to one with a knowledge of equine qualifications, would be said to possess both speed and bottom.

Mounting, the priest rode away from the stage-road, following the trail left by the Buckskin Bravos in their retreat.

Without hesitancy he kept on the trail, seemingly knowing something of woodcraft, and after a ride of miles came to a canyon which led him into a valley beyond.

He was about to ride down into the valley, still following the trail, when his keen eyes detected a moving object afar off upon the summit of a lone mountain.

Instantly he reined his horse back, and dismounting, he sought the shelter of a cedar-tree, and gazed long and fixedly at the summit of the lofty peak.

"There is their haunt, and it is a good retreat, for I did not believe the summit could be gained," he muttered to himself.

A moment he stood in silent thought, and then said slowly:

"Yes, that being their haunt, they will doubtless make the spot where they robbed the stage their striking-point."

"I'll go there and await their coming."

Again he mounted, and turned the head of his horse back the way he had come.

As he passed through some timber a squirrel sprang up before him and rushed for a tree some paces distant.

Thrusting his hand quickly into the breast of his coat, it returned with a revolver, and he fired with a quickness and skill which were remarkable, considering his holy calling, for the squirrel dropped to the ground with a bullet in his brain.

"He'll make me a good supper," was the quiet comment of the priest, as he threw another cartridge into his revolver, returned it to his pocket, and picking up his game, rode on.

He was passing through a narrow ravine, with rocky walls upon either side, and a hard footing, which gave back loudly the echoes of his horse's hoofs, when he drew rein suddenly, for his ear had detected some sound other than those made by the hoof-falls.

Listening, he distinctly heard the rapid clatter of hoofs, and that they were coming toward him he knew.

He could not fly back down the ravine, as there was a long stretch before him through which he must pass, and those coming would catch sight of him, as they would come around the bend in a moment or two and be in full sight.

Fortunately for him a large rock had broken away from one wall of the ravine, and falling into the bottom afforded him a place of refuge, provided no one took it into his head to ride behind it in passing.

Toward this he spurred quickly, and had just gotten out of sight when those he sought to avoid came around the bend in the ravine.

There was very little space behind the rock, and just room enough to hide one man and horse; but that was sufficient for the priest, and he seemed satisfied.

From his position he could not see those who were coming as they went by, but as soon as they passed the rock he obtained a view of them.

A sight of the party, for there were four mounted persons, acted like magic upon him, for, drawing a revolver from each breast-pocket, he drove his spurs into the flanks of his horse, and darted out right upon their rear.

Then followed a couple of rapid shots, a ringing war-cry, a scream in a girl's voice, and the priest was by the side of Red Star, the young Queen of the Blackfeet, who was securely bound hands and feet, and strapped to her horse.

Upon the ground lay two dead Sioux warriors, while, flying down the canyon, as though a regiment was at his heels, was Fighting Crow, and the ponies of the slain braves.

Red Star had met missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant in the Indian camps, but she had never seen one on the war-path before, and she gazed at the priest in amazement, while she said:

"The Great Spirit Chief is good to Red Star, and he is a great warrior."

The priest smiled blandly at the praise, while he quickly severed the bonds of the Indian girl, and said:

"Let the Red Star come with the Great Spirit Chief."

Without a word she seized her reins, and then hesitated and pointing to the two warriors asked innocently:

"Will the Great Spirit Chief take the scalps of the Sioux braves?"

The priest shook his head and the two rode off together at a rapid gallop, leaving the dead warriors where they had fallen.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE BLACK HERMIT.

IN a wild canyon of the mountains, half a dozen leagues from Camp Comfort, a man was seated in the entrance to a cavern, busily engaged in making a quiver of arrows.

That the picturesque yet desolate place was his home there was no doubt, for the skins of wild beasts were tacked upon the large trees near by to dry, and the heap of ashes piled up at one side of the cavern entrance showed that there the man lived and had lived for a long while.

Piles of fagots were also near at hand, an ax stood at one side of the cave, across the front of which was a wall of logs, built seemingly for the double purpose of keeping out the cold in winter and serving as a breast-work of defense.

The rude door in the log wall was open, displaying a cavern of large size, with a bed of skins, a rustic table, a frying-pan and oven, and along the walls bows and arrows, tomahawks, scalps, and the wings of innumerable birds, while a stuffed owl and snake were over the entrance, serving in the place of a coat-of-arms.

The dweller in this strange den sat upon the outside upon a bear-robe, and, at a first glance he might have been taken for a wild beast, for he was clad in a strange and savage costume.

Upon his massive head he wore a coronet of feathers of all hues, and about his body was a hunting-shirt of panther-skins, while his legs were incased in buckskin leggings,

tanned with the hair on, and worn on the outside.

About the waist was a belt, a wolf-head serving as a buckle, and fox-tails hanging down about it like tassels.

At his back was a long bow and two quivers of arrows, while in the belt were a pair of huge dragoon pistols and a bowie-knife.

At his side, leaning against the rocky wall into which his cavern penetrated, was an army musket that looked as if it might have done duty against the British in the war of 1812.

Lying near the man was a huge wolf fast asleep, and on a perch above his head sat an owl, hooting most dismally as the shadows of coming night began to darken the valley.

And this strange being, who dwelt in that weird place, was a negro.

Above six feet in height, a perfect Hercules in size, and as black as polished ebony, he was.

He was known to the few hunters, guides and trappers that had seen him as the Black Hermit, and the ravine where he dwelt was called the Black Hermit Canyon.

He seemed to avoid white men, and only once had been seen at Camp Comfort, when he went there to exchange skins for ammunition and other articles he needed.

Indians he seemed rather to seek than avoid, and the red-skins shunned him as an evil spirit, and well they might, for the scalps hanging upon his walls had been taken from warriors' heads.

Somehow it had gained ground that the Black Hermit had once been a slave, and had come West with his master and family, all of whom had been massacred one night by the Indians excepting himself, and that he had sworn a bitter revenge.

Whether true or not, it was certain that the Black Hermit had sent many a warrior to the happy hunting-grounds during his hermitage in the Black Hills.

And, as the Black Hermit sat there making his arrows, that pleasant June afternoon, his quick ear detected a sound he seldom heard in his canyon, and springing to his feet he glanced in the direction from whence it came.

Then his eyes fell upon two horses, and upon their backs were riders.

With a dark scowl, he seized his musket, called to his wolf and owl, and started to enter the cabin.

The wolf sprang in before him, the owl flew down upon his shoulder, and entering his den the Black Hermit closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BLACK HERMIT RECEIVES VISITORS.

THE two persons, whom the Black Hermit had discovered approaching his den, were the priest and Red Star, the Girl Queen of the Blackfeet.

That he did not wish callers was very evident by the inhospitable way he had decamped upon observing their approach.

And it may be that he wished to prepare against surprise, for he stood by his door, his eye at a hole in the log wall.

Those he saw approaching might be foes, and he certainly had no reason to look for friends.

Before coming within range of the arrows or antiquated rifle of the Hermit, the priest halted, and raised his hands above his head.

After holding them there for an instant he clasped them upon his forehead and bowed three times.

Then he rode on again, accompanied by Red Star, and the Black Hermit at once threw open his door and stepped out, repeating the same movements which the priest had just gone through.

Riding up near the cavern, the priest dismounted, and leaving Red Star still upon her horse, he approached the Hermit with the remark:

"Does not Ham remember his friend?"

"Yas, massa, I knows yer now; but it has been long time sin' I seen yer, an' I wasn't 'spectin' yer."

"Come in, sah, for I is allers glad ter see yer," answered the negro, in a low, hoarse voice, and in a hesitating tone, as though he had to think a word over before he gave utterance to it.

"Ham, do you see that Indian girl?" asked the priest.

"Yas, sah, an' I don't like Injuns," and the negro scowled.

"You have had cause to hate them, Ham, from what you once told me."

"I has, sah, I has," almost savagely said the Black Hermit.

"But, Ham, that is not an Indian warrior."

"No, sah, she am a Injun gal."

"Yes, and it is Red Star, the Girl Queen of the Blackfeet."

"Blackfeet Injuns is better den Sioux, but dey is all putty much ob a likeness, massa," was the reply.

"But there are good Indians, Ham—"

"Dem Injuns whose scalps I is got hangin' up in de house am good Injuns, massa."

The priest smiled at this, and humoring the negro, answered:

"Well, Ham, you have been a true avenger, and many a red-skin has fallen by your hand."

"I guess you have twenty scalps fully in your house, as you call your cave."

"Jist thirty-one, massa."

"Indeed!"

"Well, Ham, there is one Indian that I wish to leave in your charge."

"Am he a priz'ner, massa?"

"It is yonder poor girl."

"Yas, sah."

"She was stolen from her village by an old lover, who had joined the Sioux, and I rescued her, but have not time to return with her now to her people, for I have something of importance to attend to."

"Yas, massa."

"And, Ham, I wish you would take care of the girl for me."

"I will, sah, an' give her de house ter sleep in, fer I sleeps outside in summer-time."

"Well, look after her well, give her plenty to eat, and I will come for her as soon as I can."

"Yas, massa, I'll do jist as you says fer me ter do."

"I know that you will, Ham, and now I will leave Red Star here with you."

"Better stay here yerself ter-night, massa, fer it am gittin' dark, an' 'sides, I kin gib yer a awful nice supper," said Ham, as the priest called to Red Star to approach.

"Thank you, Ham, I believe that I will camp with you to-night and take an early start in the morning."

"Golly! it will be joyous, an' seem like old times, ter hev visitors round de camp-fire wid me," said the Black Hermit, evidently delighted with the chance of playing host.

Red Star approached, while Ham took her pony and the priest's horse and staked them out on the banks of a small creek near by, after which he returned to his den, with a string of fish he had caught that afternoon.

"This is the Black Hermit, Red Star, and he will let you remain here until I come to take you to the village of your people," said the priest.

"Yas, Missy Red Star, I wants yer ter stay jist as long as you pleases, fer I hain't no hard feelin's agin' you, though I has been trailin' red-skins lively in my time; but if yer is ther friend o' massa here, you is my friend, Missy Red Star."

The Indian girl had often heard of the Black Hermit, and well knew with what horror he was looked upon by the warriors of her tribe; but she saw that his manner was friendly, and grasped his hand, while she said:

"The Red Star will be the friend of the Black Hermit."

This seemed to please the negro, for he laughed lightly, while he muttered:

"Golly! me an' Injun friends arter all dese long years."

"But den squaws don't count."

With this the Black Hermit set to work to build a fire, and from his larder brought forth game of various kinds and a bag of corn-meal, out of which he made a hoeecake.

Then some coffee was produced, and the strange trio sat down about the camp-fire in that wild canyon and ate a hearty supper, unmindful of the hootings of the tame owl and the growling of the wolf, who could not understand this feast, at which they were ruled out by their cable master.

CHAPTER XL.

FORCED TO TERMS.

I MUST now return to poor Clarice Courtney and Mr. Carson, who the reader will remember, were captives in the Robbers' Roost, as the Buckskin Bravos called their retreat upon the mountain summit.

To Clarice her captors brought a most tempting supper; but she was in no mood to enjoy it, and scarcely tasted what was set before her.

She could not but think of her poor sick father and anxious mother, and wonder when she would see them.

Shortly after supper Mr. Carson came to see her, and said that the men were talking over what was to be done with them, and told her to cheer up.

Then he left her, with the advice to try and go to sleep.

This advice she was very willing to follow and she threw several logs of wood upon the fire, for the night was really cold on the mountain, and, finding that her cot was spread with soft bear-skins and a new blanket, she retired to rest and soon forgot her troubles in slumber.

When she awoke it was to a full realization of her captivity; but, determined to make the best of it, she ate her breakfast, and then went out for a walk.

For a long time she stood, lost in contemplation of the grand scenery about her, and then started, as she heard a step behind her.

It was Mr. Carson, and his face wore an anxious look, which she at once observed and asked quickly:

"Well, Mr. Carson, what is to be our fate?"

"Clarice, I must talk plainly to you," was the response.

"I will listen," and the young girl felt a foreboding of coming evil.

"Here, sit on that rock and hear me," and he motioned her to a moss-grown rock near.

Quietly she sat down, and standing in front of her, his arms folded upon his breast, and leaning against a tree, he said softly:

"Clarice, do not feel angry with me at what I have to say."

"Why should I be angry with you, my kind friend?" she answered.

"The truth is," he went on, "that I told the outlaws a falsehood about you."

"About me?" and the innocent eyes opened in amazement.

"Yes."

"Why, what falsehood could you tell them about me?" she asked in surprise.

"To be frank, the man they call Sergeant Duff is not their chief."

"Well, Mr. Carson?"

"Their chief is at present absent, and from what they know of him, they say they are assured that he would not give you up if he saw you."

"Not give me up?" and she repeated the words slowly, while her face became very pale.

"Yes, for he would be infatuated by your beauty, and force you to become his wife, for he is a reckless devil, they say."

"Oh, Heaven have mercy upon me!" groaned the unhappy girl.

Then she added quickly.

"But I will appeal to his cupidity, and if he is a robber, surely his love of gold should conquer all other feeling."

"They say that he does not care for gold, and that he cannot be bribed if he sees you, and thus it was that I was forced to tell the falsehood."

"Ah, yes; but what was the falsehood?"

He remained silent for an instant, and then said:

"I told the Buckskin Bravos that you were my wife!"

Like a startled fawn she sprung to her feet, her face deadly pale, while she cried, excitedly:

"Oh! why did you tell them that?"

"To save you, Clarice."

"To save me? but how?"

"Believing you to be a young girl, their chief would seek to marry you, where, believing you to be my wife, he would be willing to accept ransom for you."

She nodded her head as though she understood his motive to be a good one, and he continued:

"But the band would not believe me, so I was forced to offer them terms."

"How mean you?"

"I mean that they are willing to be bribed, if they can make it all clear to their chief when he returns in a few days."

"I am still ignorant as to your meaning, Mr. Carson."

"To be more explicit, Clarice, I will tell you that Sergeant Duff flatly told me that he knew that you were not my wife, but added that if you did become so he would be justified in accepting a ransom for you."

"If I did become so?" she asked, in a dazed way.

"Yes; he intimated that a minister could be sent for to the nearest station, and we could be married, and then he would arrange the terms of ransom before the chief's return, and that you could go after the gold and send it back by a trusted member of the band, while I remained here until it was paid."

"Oh! Mr. Carson, this is terrible!" and Clarice covered her face with her hands.

"I know that it is sudden and necessarily shocks you, Clarice; but I frankly confess that I love you, and intended to seek to gain your hand some day in the future."

"At such a time I should not tell you of my love; but then, if you consent to be bound to me it is better that you know you marry one who devotedly loves you, and to prove it, I will promise that, when I am released from this camp, I will not come near you unless you so wish it."

"But alone I will go my way, and you can in a year's time free yourself from me upon the plea of desertion."

"As I told you, Clarice, I am a poor man, and it will have to be the gold you get from your parents that buys my freedom, so, if you go from here in perfect freedom as my wife, and care not to redeem me, as it were, then do not send the gold and let my fate be what these men care to have it."

She listened in silence to his words, and then said frankly:

"Mr. Carson, I will tell you in all honesty that I do not love you, and I abhor the thought of being forced into this marriage."

"But I admire and respect you, and I will be governed by you in this matter, as I feel that you are a noble man, and will act only for my good."

"I will, indeed, Clarice, and I also abhor the idea of forcing you into this marriage; but I know well who and what are the Buckskin Bravos and their chief, and did he see you he would love you, and loving you, he would force you to become his wife."

"His men say that they will accept a thousand dollars each as a bribe, if you marry me, and then agree with you for a ransom of ten thousand for you and I, permitting you to go after the money, which will go to the chief to divide as he pleases, and that I am to remain here until the gold is paid."

"There is a man in the band who has lately joined, and he knows of a priest in a mining-camp whom he can get to come here and perform the ceremony, and immediately after it you will be sent by a competent guide to your parents."

"Arriving there, if you do not care to send the gold, so be it; if you do, I will prove my appreciation of your kindness by staying away from you until you bid me come to you."

"Now, Clarice, you know all."

"Yes; and I will become your wife, and my first duty upon reaching my parents will be to send the price of your ransom and the money the men demand as a bribe."

She spoke firmly, but he could see that she suffered, and that she had been brought to terms only through a desire to escape under any circumstances from the dread power of the Buckskin Bravos.

"I will at once acquaint the Bravos with what you say, Clarice, and let them send their man after the priest, for, as they expect their chief in a few days, there is little time to be lost, and I wish to get you away from here before his arrival."

"They would not let me go, upon my pledge to send the money, without my marrying you?" she faltered.

"I will ask them once more with pleasure—nay, you shall ask them yourself."

She saw a loop-hole of escape, perhaps, and, like a drowning man grasping at a straw, clutched at it eagerly.

"Yes, let me ask them."

"Come," he said, and he led her to where the group of Bravos sat, chatting together.

Addressing herself to Sergeant Duff, she told him what she had heard from her fellow-prisoner, and added:

"Now I do not love this gentleman, much as I admire and respect him, for he has been so kind to me, and I do not wish to marry him, so beg you will allow me to go to my parents, with one of your own men to accompany me, and I pledge you my word that I will return you the sum you demand."

The Bravos all shook their heads, while Sergeant Duff said bluntly:

"No, no, miss, for you might not send the gold, much as you intended to."

"But if the gentleman is your husband, then you would not desert him, I know, and the ceremony has got to be performed before you go, unless you wish to remain and take the chances with our chief."

"No, no, I will accept your terms," eagerly cried the poor girl, and she turned and walked quickly away to her hut, and throwing herself upon her cot she wept bitterly, for her heart was full of sorrow at the thought that she was to be bound to a man whom she did not love.

CHAPTER XLI.

A PRIEST'S FATE.

Two horsemen were coming slowly down a steep hillside, independent of trail or bearings, apparently, so that they reached the narrow valley at its base.

One of the men, he who was in advance, had taken the precaution to dismount and lead his somewhat jaded-looking horse, for the descent was a perilous one for man and beast alike.

The other individual remained in the saddle, and aided his horse all he could with rein and voice.

The latter was dressed in the garb of a priest of the Romish Church, had a clean-shaven face, and yet there was an air of boldness in it which his apparent calling could not conceal.

He was well mounted, but carried no arms that were visible.

The other, he who preferred to be on foot should his horse fall, was an Irishman, as a glance was sufficient to show.

He had a straggling beard, was sunburnt almost to the hue of an Indian, and his dark complexion was in striking contrast to his red hair and blue eyes.

He was also well mounted and well armed, for besides his rifle at his back, he carried two revolvers and a knife in his belt.

"Glory be to God? Father Moriarty, we are almost down this devil's hill," he cried, turning to the priest.

"Yes, Michael, we may consider the danger of the descent over," answered the priest.

But, even as he spoke, and just when the Irishman leading had reached the valley, the horse of the priest stumbled, tried to recover himself, missed his footing, and fell heavily, throwing his rider and rolling over him.

"The Lord be betune me an' harum! the praist is did intoirely," cried Michael, or Mike O'Doud, crossing himself in holy horror at the thought, while he sprung to the side of the prostrate man.

With head gashed by the sharp stones, one arm doubled up and broken under him, and with no sign of life in him the priest lay, while the Irishman bent over him, trying in vain to rouse him.

"Come back to loif, Father Moriarty, av yer plaize."

"Bad luck to thet same hill an' the devil of a brute thet toomblid him."

"Faith, I was afther tellin' him it was safer to be walking on fut, but he obsarves thet his religion would uphold him, and begorra, it's the soul of him that's knocked clane out of 'im."

And thus the Irishman ran on, while he endeavored to rouse the priest, to no avail.

"Well, my son, you have met with trouble I see!"

Mike O'Doud gave vent to a cry of terror, and dropping his hand upon his revolver, turned upon the one whose voice had so disturbed him, when he believed himself wholly alone.

To his utter amazement he saw before him another priest, and out came the words:

"Glory be to God! the woods is afther being full of them!"

"The woods are full of what, my son?" asked the priest, who was the one whom the reader has before met, and who had approached unseen by the Irishman in his distress.

"Full of your riverences, I means, father, fer here is afther being Father Moriarty did as the divil, an' there is afther bein' yoursilf, while yesterday it was hard to find a riverince in the Black Hills, bad luck to 'em."

Without questioning Michael O'Doud as to whether he meant bad luck to the priest or the Black Hills, the new-comer stepped forward and bent over the prostrate man, laying his hand upon his heart.

"He is dead," he said, simply.

"God rist his sowl," and Mike crossed himself and muttered a Latin prayer.

"Yes, he is dead, poor man, his end was sudden."

"Who is he?"

"Father Moriarty, yer riverince, from Custer Mine Camps, sur."

"Where was he going?"

The Irishman's face flushed, and he remained silent.

"Where was he going?" calmly asked his questioner.

"He was afther going with me, sur."

"Where were you going, my son?"

"To my camp, yer riverince."

"Who are you?"

"Michael O'Doud, from the ould sod, God bliss her, sur; but the b'ys call me Irish Moike."

"Ah! I have heard of you, my son; you are a member of the band of robbers know as the Buckskin Bravos of the Black Hills," and the priest eyed him sternly.

"Bad luck to the tongue of me, for giving away me name of Irish Moike," muttered Irish Mike, in ill-humor with himself.

"And where was Father Moriarty going with you, Mike?"

"To the Roost, yer riverince, to confess the b'ys."

"Is that all?"

"Sure, and it's enough to confess the b'ys in the Roost, yer riverince, without being afther asking more."

"Yes, there is a great deal of sin there to confess, Michael O'Doud, and you have doubtless a hundred unforgiven sins on your soul, and may die at any moment without absolution."

"The Holy Vargin ferbid thet same, your riverince, an' it's mesilf would be glad to confess now, ef your riverince would be so good to me," and Mike was evidently distressed in mind at the picture drawn by the priest.

"First tell me the truth, and why you were taking Father Moriarty to the Roost, as you call your camp?"

"Will, sir, I'll make a clane story of it, for I'll have to confess all."

"Yer say, yer riverince, they are afther playing a little game up at the Roost, for they are to have a wedding."

"A wedding, my son?"

"Yis, father."

"Who is to be married there?"

"A swate cr'ature thet is a daisy, your riverince."

"So they know'd I was afther being a thrue Catholic, and they sint me over to Custer Mine Camps to get the praisit, and I got Father Moriarty, telling him the b'ys wished to confiss and one of 'em git married."

"And he agreed to go with you?"

"Sure and he did, your riverince, for he is afther being one of the salt of the earth, and would go anywhere to do a man a good turn."

"Yes, Father Moriarty was a good man, and he has met his death in a sad way."

"But he shall have decent burial, Mike, so let us seek some quiet spot and dig a grave for him."

This was done, and the body of the unfortunate man was wrapped in his blanket and consigned to the grave with the low-whispered prayers of the priest who had so opportunely come upon the scene of death.

As the horse ridden by the dead priest had broken his leg in his fall, Irish Mike quickly put him out of his misery with a pistol-shot, and then said:

"Now, your riverince, is it yersilf that

will be afther going to the Roost with me to confiss the b'ys, and marry the swate gurrul to her lover?"

"Yes, I will go with you, Michael," was the reply, and mounting their horses the ill-matched pair set off together for the retreat of the Buckskin Bravos.

CHAPTER XLII.

MR. CARSON'S STORY.

MR. CARSON was pacing to and fro on the summit of Robbers' Roost, his face anxious, as he gazed out over the scene spread before him.

But his eyes did not rest upon the scenery with any expression of enjoyment in the view, but rather they seemed searching for some object.

At last his face brightened, and he exclaimed:

"They are coming!"

Placing a glass to his eyes he gazed intently at two horsemen who were approaching, and said:

"Yes, one is the Irishman, the other the priest; but they will not arrive here until dark."

"Now to see if the priest will undertake the work for me."

Darkness had fallen upon the Roost before the two horsemen rode into the fort and dismounted.

They were met by Sergeant Duff and Mr. Carson, and the former said:

"Well, Mike, you got the priest?"

"Sure, and it looks loike him, bedad," was the reply.

Then, turning to the priest, Sergeant Duff continued:

"Well, father, you are welcome to the Roost, though it's a terrible lot of sinners you come among."

"My duties carry me continually among sinners, my son," was the reply of the priest.

"Well, father, I guess we take the deck for wickedness; but come and have some supper with us, and then Mr. Carson will tell you why he sent for you."

The priest readily accepted the invitation to supper, and seemed greatly to enjoy the meal, as did the sergeant, though Mr. Carson ate very little and seemed anxious.

After it was over, Sergeant Duff got up and left the two seated together in front of the camp-fire.

"Well, father, as Sergeant Duff said, I will explain to you why we asked you to visit us, and I suppose it might as well be done to-night."

"Yes, my son, for with the early dawn I must return to the camps, where important duties call me."

"Ah! so soon?"

"Yes, for I cannot delay."

"Then we must act at once, so I will speak to Miss Courtney upon the subject, so that she may not retire."

Rising, Mr. Carson hurried away from the camp-fire, and was gone some minutes.

Then he returned, and, seating himself, told the story of his having been sent early in the past fall to bring Miss Courtney to the Black Hills, but had gotten snowed in, and had only that spring been able to accomplish it.

Then the story of their capture by the Buckskin Bravos was told, and how the robbers had consented to allow Clarice to go after the ransom money, and keep him there as a hostage, if she was his wife.

"Does the lady consent to this marriage?" asked the priest.

"She does, father; but have I not met you before, sir?"

"Possibly, and your face has seemed most familiar to me, and I have thought that I might have met you at Camp Comfort Post, when I have gone there to visit the Catholic soldiers of the regiment."

"Oh, yes! that is where we have met; but to resume, father:

"Miss Courtney consents, and, as I love her devotedly, I hope to make her a good husband."

"But now to a sad part of my story."

"Well, my son?"

"Since my return to the border it has been told me that Miss Courtney's parents are both dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, father; her father died in the mines, soon after my departure, and her mother

then sought to get to the East, with a few other unfortunates.

"They started, alas! too late, for a fearful snow-storm overtook them at the outset, the same which kept me snowed in in a miners' camp, and they wandered about under the guidance of a man, now dead, who sought their gold, until one by one they died."

"This is fearful, my son; but who was this man?"

"His name was Colorado King, and though a scout at Camp Comfort Post, he was recently the leader of this band of desperadoes."

"Mrs. Courtney, it seems, was the last to die, and, as the others had dropped off, they left to her their gold, and she, in turn, left all to her daughter."

"Wild Bill—"

"Yes, I have heard of the man."

"Yes, he is a well-known man upon the border; well, he came upon the scene to find Mrs. Courtney dying, and she got a pledge from him to seek her daughter and give to her the gold."

"But this Colorado King shot Wild Bill—"

"Killed him?"

"Oh no, but wounded him and left him for dead, while he, hiding the gold, hastened back to the fort."

"Wild Bill, however, was miraculously saved, and rehiding the gold, turned up early this spring at the post, and Colorado King had to fly for his life."

"Yes, my son."

"He came to his band, the Bravos here, but was afterward killed by Wild Bill."

"Ah! I am glad he was punished for his crimes."

"Yes, it is a blessing; but now, father, I have not had the heart to tell poor Clarice of her parents' fate, and I beg you to do so, and I have decided that she had better go with you to the post, and have you get her gold for her, for though Wild Bill has gone on duty to the southern prairies, he has left with Colonel Burr a chart of the place where the treasure is hidden."

"Yes, my son."

"When she gets her treasure, Clarice can give to you the sum demanded for my ransom, and you can bring it here, and release me, and most liberal shall be your reward."

"I ask only the reward, my son, of knowing that I do my duty," said the priest, reprovingly.

"Well, you certainly will do a good work in obtaining for this poor girl her fortune."

"When I am released, I will go to Cheyenne, where I wish Clarice to await me, provided she wishes to be my wife, but if not, I have promised to go my way and leave her free."

"It is very noble of you my son."

"I love her, father, and wish to act justly toward her."

"It shows your good heart, my son."

"But now, as I must depart at daylight, it is best to have the ceremony to-night, and have Miss—Miss—What is the lady's name, my son?"

"Miss Clarice Courtney."

"True; well, it is best she go with me at once to the post, and I will leave her there while I go on to the camps to attend to the duty I have on hand."

"Upon my return, through Colonel Burr, she can have secured her gold, and I will then bring the amount of ransom here with me, for I wish to act for your good in this matter."

"You are very kind, father, and now we will have the ceremony," and rising, Mr. Carson led the priest to the cabin occupied by Clarice. Sergeant Duff and Irish Mike being called as witnesses.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE MIDNIGHT MARRIAGE.

CLARICE COURTNEY had seen the priest ride into the Roost with Irish Mike, and her heart began to beat rapidly.

Then Mr. Carson had come to her, and told her that as the holy father had to depart at daybreak, it was necessary to have the marriage ceremony performed at once.

Mr. Carson had confessed to being a Catholic, and, educated at a convent, Clarice had been brought up in that faith, so that there could be no scruples upon the part of the priest about performing the marriage

rites, if the maiden said she was willing to wed her fellow-captive.

Going to the cabin, they found the poor girl very pale, but firm, and Mr. Carson introduced to her the priest, and left him alone with her for a short while.

A few questions were asked Clarice, which she answered calmly, and then Mr. Carson and the others were summoned to the hut.

Taking their places, with Sergeant Duff and Irish Mike in the cabin as witnesses, and the rest of the Bravos looking in at the door, the priest took out his book, and slowly read the service in a low tone.

The responses were given by both Carson and Clarice in a firm voice, and the ceremony had ended.

"Now leave me!" urged the poor girl, as Carson stepped forward to lead her to a seat.

"I will do so, Clarice; but by early dawn you must be ready to accompany the priest, and Irish Mike will go as guide.

"I will see you to say farewell, and, if you say so, it shall be our last farewell, said Mr. Carson, in a low, sad tone.

Clarice made no reply, and the next moment she was alone.

Throwing herself upon her cot she burst into tears, and after a long time had cried herself to sleep.

The fire had burned low, when she was awakened by a knock at the door.

"It is time to get up, Clarice, and prepare for your journey.

"Your breakfast I will bring you soon," said a voice without.

"Thank you, I will be ready," she said, wearily.

Half an hour after, while it was yet dark, she was placed in her saddle by Mr. Carson, who grasped her hand, imprinted a kiss upon it, while he said:

"Farewell, Clarice, and remember, I await the coming of the good priest to know whether I shall go forth alone and wretched in the world, or come to you."

"You shall know then; good-by," and releasing her hand she rode away, following Irish Mike and the priest.

When the sun arose, the priest rode alongside of the Irishman, and said:

"Michael, are you at heart an evil man?"

"Bedad, your riverince, I wouldn't be afther harting a fly," was the answer.

"Then why do you belong to so vile a band as the Buckskin Bravos?"

"It's me bad luck, sur."

"Why did you join them?"

"Faith, an' they joined me, your riverince, for I was afther getting robbed by thim same, and I've been wid thim since."

"Well, Michael, if you stay with them, you'll end your days on a rope."

"The Lord forbid, and St. Patrick preserve me!" fervently said Irish Mike.

"You had better begin at once to lead an honest life, and if you will say that you are willing to do so, I'll get you a place at the post."

"God bless your riverince, I says it a hundred toimes over."

"Then, Michael, remember to prove your words by your actions," said the priest, and he rode on with Clarice and entered into conversation with her.

He saw that she felt the importance of the step which she had taken, yet did so, feeling that it was for the best.

It pained him to have to tell her of the death of her parents, those whom she fondly hoped to see, and he determined not to let her know of their fate until they should reach the post, where she would be among those who could offer her every sympathy.

As they rode along the priest suddenly detected two persons on the trail before them.

They were mounted, and had halted with the evident intention of reconnoitering the priest and his party as they approached, while they had taken up a position from which they could readily decamp, or defend themselves, as circumstances made it necessary.

CHAPTER XLIV.

FROM THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE.

"YER riverince had better go slow," called out Mike, as he saw the two horsemen ahead, and, not being possessed of the best eyesight

could not tell whether he expected to find in them friends or foes.

"Yes, Mike, I'll go slow; but I'll be fast enough to take those gentlemen where they'll do no more mischief," answered the priest.

"Faith, and you know thim thin, sir?"

"Yes."

"Bad luck to thim ef your riverince says so."

"I'll give you a chance, Michael, to prove your words about desiring to lead a better life."

"Thry me, for the love o' God, your riverince," exclaimed Mike, with a warmth that made Clarice laugh.

"Well, Mike, I intend to make those two men prisoners."

"Glory be to Moses, but it's a fighting praist ye are ivery toime."

The priest smiled, and, as they had now drawn nearer the two horsemen, who still kept their ground, and awaited their coming, he said:

"Mike, have you heard of a man in your band by the name of Barney?"

"Oh, but I have, bad luck to him, for he was foriver playing his pranks on me, an' mesilf an Irishman like the spalpeen he is."

"Did you know what became of him?"

"Thet Whirlwind o' the West, Wild Bill, was afther killing him, your riverince."

"You are mistaken, Mike, for he is one of those two men."

"The saints presarve us."

"And the other is Nick Nesbit."

"Faith, and the Whirlwind was afther killing the loikes of him, too."

"Well, those are the two men before us."

"Maybe it's their ghosts, father; but divil a bit do I care so that I have your riverince to stand between me and harum."

"I'll protect you, Mike, from man or ghost, if you do my bidding."

"Jist spake it to me, sur."

"Ride on ahead and let those men see who you are."

"Then tell them that we are friends, and Miss Courtney and myself will come on and join you."

"When we meet them, I intend to make them prisoners."

"Howly Moses!"

"Now go, sir, and I'll see if you betray me."

Mike was in a quandary, as regarded the priest; but he rode on in advance, and as the priest and the maiden rode up they saw him talking earnestly to them.

"Ride a little upon my left, please, Miss Courtney," said the priest, and the next instant he rode up and halted before the two men, who had been disarmed of their suspicions by the appearance of Irish Mike, and nodded as the two drew rein.

Then the priest suddenly dropped his hands upon his legs, the long tails of his coat were thrown aside, and from two pockets in the pants upon the side of each leg he drew revolvers, while he said, sternly:

"Men, you are my prisoners!"

Had a regiment of cavalry charged them down the steep sides of the canyon, they could not have been more startled than by the warlike act of the priest.

They looked, at any rate, distressed and haggard, while their buckskin suits were in tatters, as though they had passed through some severe ordeal; but they turned deadly pale at the words of the priest, and really appeared to be pitiable objects, indeed.

Barney was the first to gain his accustomed equilibrium, and said, in his quaint way:

"Is you a pulpit-pounder on the war-path, or has yer been tacklin' tanglefoot, and you is lettin' off yer fun on us?"

"There is no fun in it, sir, as you and your companion will find out," sternly said the priest.

"Waal, yer had oughter be ashamed o' yerself ter carry weepin's and a Bible-book at ther same time."

"Michael, disarm those two men," sternly ordered the priest.

"Say, pulpit-pounder pard, we is honest miners what hev jist escaped from the Black-foot Injuns."

"They war a-goin' ter torture us to death, but two squaws choosed us fer husbands, and thet saved us."

"But we didn't like livin' among heathen Injuns, so we jist levanted, and were on our

way to the mines ter work honest, and now you lights down upon us," and Barney put on a most woe-begone expression.

"Michael, disarm those men and bind them."

"Not fer me!"

Barney almost yelled the words, and, as quick as a flash, his hand was upon a revolver, for he had determined to risk a shot from the priest.

But instantly came the flash of the priest's revolver, and Barney, the outlaw, dropped dead from his saddle, while Clarice uttered a cry of horror, and covered her face with her hands to shut out the fearful sight.

"Disarm and bind that man, Michael, for the other does not need it," calmly said the priest.

"Be jabers, but ye are afther saying thrue, father, for his toes are turned up to the starlight," said Mike, as he stepped forward and disarmed Nick Nesbit, who was trembling with terror.

"Now, Mike, dig a grave for that man, and you, sir, aid him!" ordered the priest.

"Howly Moses! but that is phat I calls dacint, indade, for the father is afther killing the spalpeen, and thim burying him with full sarvice."

"Begorra, but a foinc wake we'd have over Barney, if we had him up with the b'ys, fer he was a chipper lad was he."

Irish Mike then set to work, aided by Nick Nesbit, and a grave was quickly dug in the soft earth and the body placed in it.

"Now tie that man to his horse, Michael, and we'll ride on."

"Yes, yer riverince, and divil a prayer will ye say over Barney?"

"No."

"Bad luck to him thin, he is not worth it," and Mike soon had Nick Nesbit secure, and leading the Indian pony of the dead man, followed on by the side of his prisoner, to whom he talked about—

"That same howly father that could be afther slinging bullits as straight as prayers."

Pressing rapidly on, the priest leading with Clarice at his side, the party rode into Camp Comfort Post just after sunset, Irish Mike with considerable dread as to his future, and Nick Nesbit feeling that his doom was sealed.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE PRIEST'S CONFESSION.

COLONEL DANGERFIELD BURR sat in his room at head-quarters, talking with Lieutenant Harry Lockwood.

The latter had recovered from his wounds, and was most anxious to be on the war-path once more, against both the red-skins, who were becoming troublesome, and the Buckskin Bravos, whose lawless acts against the dwellers in, and emigrants to, the Black Hills had already begun.

The colonel and lieutenant were discussing the best way to strike a blow at the Indians, the former remarking:

"We'll settle the Indian question first, Lockwood, and as for the road-agents, it will be time enough to hit them when Wild Bill returns."

"But, colonel, are you not a little anxious about Wild Bill, as his time is up when he expected to return?" asked the young officer.

"No, for somehow I feel that Hickok can always look after himself most thoroughly—Well orderly, what is it?" and the colonel turned to his orderly, who just then entered.

"There is a priest here to see you, sir, and he is accompanied by a lady, a comrade, and a prisoner."

"Indeed! a strange quartette, I should say."

"But, orderly, show his reverence and the lady in."

Lieutenant Lockwood arose to depart, when the colonel bade him remain, saying:

"I guess there is nothing of a private nature to be discussed, Lockwood."

"But who can they be?"

The young officer was as unable as was the colonel to answer this question, and the next instant in walked the priest, already known to the reader, accompanied by Clarice Courtney.

The moment that the handsome young lieutenant beheld Clarice he fell in love with her, while Colonel Burr bowed low with marked respect, as he said:

"Be seated, lady, and you, too, sir, and tell me how I can serve you."

The priest led Clarice to a chair, and, remaining standing himself, said, in his deep tones:

"Colonel Burr, permit me to present to you Miss Courtney, a young lady I beg to place under your protection for the present."

"I certainly accept the responsibility of Miss Courtney's protector with a great deal of pleasure; but may I ask, sir, your name?" said the colonel, in his courtly way.

"You might call me Father James, sir," was the quiet reply.

Colonel Burr then presented Lieutenant Lockwood to his guests, and the lights having been brought in, he asked:

"Have we not met before, Father James?"

"We have, sir."

"I must plead ignorance as to when and where."

"We last met, sir, in this room, some weeks ago."

"You astonish me, sir, for I have received no clerical visitor at this post for months."

The priest gave a quiet laugh, and then said:

"Colonel Burr, I am glad to see that I have passed the scrutiny of your keen eyes, as I have that of others."

"I am *Father James B. Hickok—in other words, I am Wild Bill!*"

In spite of the presence of a lady, the colonel uttered something very like an oath, in the intensity of his surprise, while Harry Lockwood gave a shrill whistle and muttered:

"The devil a priest would be."

"No doubt I am the devil of a priest, lieutenant, but I have passed muster with an Irishman who was a good Catholic, and has implored me to hear his confession, and more, I have stood the gaze of the Buckskin Bravos in their own den."

"And no wonder, Bill, when you have cut off your long hair, shaved off your heavy mustache, and gotten out of buckskin into that clerical garb."

"How on earth did you manage to desert your pistols even to play priest?" and the colonel laughed.

"I did not desert them, sir, for I carry a weapon in each breast pocket, and see, my long coat-tails hide these pockets I had made in the legs of my pants."

"Then, sir, you are not a priest?"

"Oh! what does all this mean?" cried Clarice Courtney, pleadingly.

Instantly Wild Bill became serious, and turning to Clarice said, in his kindly way:

"Pardon me, Miss Courtney, but I owe you a full explanation, and now that you are among friends, I will give it to you for I would not say aught to give you pain, until you were under the protection of Colonel Burr."

"Then you have something terrible to tell me, for I see it in your face; I know it," said Clarice.

"I have that to tell you, Miss Courtney, which will give you deep pain."

"But you are a brave little woman, and I know will bear up under your sorrow."

"Oh, my poor father! my mother!" gasped the young girl, sinking down in her chair.

"It is of your parents that I will speak, Miss Courtney, and you shall know all, and why I have, in a measure, deceived you," said Wild Bill, in a voice of gentle sympathy.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE SPIDER'S WEB.

FROM the manner of Wild Bill, and what he said to Clarice Courtney, both Colonel Burr and Harry Lockwood felt that he had something important to communicate, and they both quietly took their seats, while the scout took his stand before the maiden, leaning in a graceful attitude against the mantle.

"Miss Courtney," began Wild Bill, in a low but distinct voice:

"It pains me to tell you that you have been basely deceived in being led to believe that you would meet here your parents."

"Oh, Heaven have mercy! Your words tell me that they are dead," groaned the unhappy girl.

"Yes, they are dead."

A sob broke from the white lips, and the face became so pale that Colonel Burr feared she would faint, and stepping to a

cupboard, poured out for her a glass of wine which he bade her drink.

She obeyed him without a word, and then said:

"I am strong now; please tell me all, sir."

"Your father, Miss Courtney, dug from his mine a large fortune, and hoped to carry it East with him, and there live in comfort with those he loved."

"But there was one in the mines whom he trusted as a friend, and that one played him false."

"This false friend was one who had known your mother, and loved her long years before, but whom she had discarded when she discovered his true character."

"He soon after committed a crime which drove him to the West a fugitive, and under an *alias* neither your father or mother knew him when they met him here."

"But he knew them well, and plotted revenge."

"His first step was to gain their friendship."

"This he did."

"Then he began his devilish work by poisoning your father by inches."

"Oh, how fearful this is that you are telling me!" cried poor Clarice.

"Bear with me, and you shall soon know all."

"In this work he succeeded, and your mother determined at once to return East, as soon as your father died."

"This man, this murderer, Colorado King by name, was her guide, and the guide of those who started with her."

"They packed their gold upon horses and started on their way, your mother having the one joy in her deep sorrow that she would soon meet you."

"From their starting Colorado King began again his deadly work, for he led them far from the direct trail, made them believe that he was lost, purposely missed all the game he shot at, and literally starved them."

"The fiend!" said Colonel Burr, indignantly.

"Thus this villain led them, while he secretly ate food which he had, and at last caused them to be delayed so long that they were caught in the first snow-storm of the winter, and a fearful one it was."

"With cold and starvation to struggle against, it is not to be wondered at that they died one by one."

"And my mother?" cried Clarice.

"Held up bravely to the last, for she was the last of that man's victims to perish."

"I was returning to this post, Miss Courtney, and came across their trail in the snow."

"Following it, I came upon a scene I can never forget, and for which there and then I would have taken the life of Colorado King."

"But your mother was dying, and called me to her side, and he got the advantage of me, giving me this wound on the head, and, as he believed, killing me."

"But your mother received from me a pledge that I would look you up and give to you your fortune."

"She gave me this old wallet, which had been your father's, and now I give it to you with its contents, as they were when I received it from her."

He took the leather wallet from his pocket as he spoke, and seizing it, Clarice kissed it over and over again, while she murmured:

"Thank you, oh, thank you!"

Resuming, Wild Bill said:

"As the snow was coming down hard, and believing he had killed me, anxious to save his life by hastening to the post, Colorado King threw the gold packs into a crevice in the rocks, intending to go on for them this spring, and departed."

"But I soon revived, and good fortune came to my aid in the shape of an Indian girl, the Queen of the Blackfeet, who was being chased by Sioux."

"I saved her from them, and in return she saved my life, for, suffering from the fever that followed my being wounded, I should have perished in the snow, had she not taken me to the village of her people."

"There I remained all winter, and was given up for dead."

"But early this spring I returned to this post, and told Colonel Burr what I now tell you."

"Here I found Colorado King; but he,

knowing his danger when he saw me alive, made his escape, and placed himself at the head of the Buckskin Bravos."

"Determined that he should never get your fortune, I securely hid it, and I buried your poor mother, and thus was that wretch thwarted."

"The chart of where your gold is buried Colonel Burr has in his possession, and also a map of just where to find the graves of your mother and father, and I now ask the colonel if he will not permit Lieutenant Lockwood to escort you there for he can bear the remains of your mother to bury them by the side of your father, and bring back the gold which is your inheritance."

"By all means, Hickok, I will let Lockwood go, and I can speak for his being most willing for the duty," said the colonel.

"Certainly, it will give me pleasure to serve Miss Courtney in any way in my power," said the young officer, perfectly delighted with the opportunity to enjoy the society of the beautiful girl.

"But will you not go, sir?" asked Clarice of Bill.

"I have an important duty to perform at once, Miss Courtney, and to delay your trip until I could go would make it most hazardous, for I am informed that there is a general rising of the Indians intended in a short time."

"You can go to the grave of your father, and return here in a week's time easily, and within that time I hope to give a good account of some work I have to do."

"Now will you tell us how it was that you came to leave your home in Chicago?"

Clarice then told the same story which Wild Bill had heard from the lips of her aunt, Mrs. Richmond, and the colonel said:

"This certainly looks like underhand work, Miss Courtney, for your parents could never have sent for you."

"I cannot believe that Mr. Carson would deceive me, sir."

"But who is this Mr. Carson?"

"I know nothing of him, sir, other than what he told me of himself."

"Will you permit me to tell the colonel and Lieutenant Lockwood of your capture by the Bravos and what followed?" asked Wild Bill.

"Certainly, sir, for there is nothing which I care to conceal," was the ready answer of the young girl.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

WILD BILL then asked Clarice to tell the story of the capture of herself and Mr. Carson by the road-agents, which she did in a most graphic manner, the scout making the comment:

"It seems that the Buckskins knew of the coming of Mr. Carson and Miss Courtney, and were prepared for them."

"It certainly looks so, Hickok," answered the colonel.

"There is no doubt of that, for they had horses to meet us at the point where they halted the stage," remarked Clarice.

"And you were both taken to the den of the Bravos?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes, sir."

"And now comes in the part I played, for I went to Chicago, Miss Courtney, saw your aunt, and when she told me you had come West, I at once pledged her I would find you, and if a wrong had been done that I would right it."

"I could not work as I then was, for all knew me, so I hit upon a plan of action, and that was to play priest."

"With my long hair and mustache cut off, and this clerical suit in place of my border attire, I assure you I did not recognize myself."

"Arriving at the station and finding the stage gone, I bought a good horse, and the next day met Buck Lee, the driver, on his return, and on the box with him, colonel, was the post sutler."

"Neither of them knew me, and Buck told me of the Buckskin Bravos' work, and I took their trail."

"As luck would have it, I came upon Fighting Crow, the Blackfoot, with two Sioux warriors, and Red Star, he having kidnapped the latter from her village."

"I picked off the Sioux, Fighting Crow ran away, and I rescued Red Star."

"I had no time to take her to her people, so carried her to the Black Hermit—"

"Ah! that wild negro?"

"Yes, colonel, and as I have twice saved his life, he will serve me well."

"I left her in his charge and returned toward the robbers' den, intending to visit it, learn the approach, and then come and get the lieutenant here to take the place, as we could do with a score of his troopers."

"Again my good fortune came to my aid, for I spied two men coming down a steep hill."

"One was on foot and leading his horse, the other was riding, and he it was that got a fall."

"I rode up to find the one whose horse had fallen with him was Father Moriarty, from the Carter Mine Camps, and that he was dead."

"Dead, Hickok?"

"Yes, colonel, and his companion was Michael O'Doud, known as Irish Mike, in the Buckskin Bravo band."

"He believed me a priest, wanted to confess to me, and then told me that the Buckskins had two captives, and that they wanted a priest to marry them, for one was a young girl, and the other a gentleman."

"His story was that the band wanted ransom, and would let the lady go to get it, if she was first married to her fellow-captive, and he was taking Father Moriarty to the den in the hope that he would perform the ceremony, but leading him to believe, to get him there, that a number of the band were Catholics, and wished to confess their sins and repent."

"The villain!" said the colonel, angrily, while Wild Bill continued:

"I told him I would go, and after burying the poor priest, and saying over him the prayers for the dead, which I knew, I went on with Irish Mike, arriving there just after dark."

"I saw Mr. Carson, and he told his story of the terms of the ransom, and I told him I would perform the ceremony if the lady consented, and that if it was done at once, for I knew that if I let the light of day shine on me, some of those sharp-eyed sinners would penetrate my disguise."

"I saw Miss Courtney, and she, in her wretchedness, and thankfulness to Carson for his kindness, consented, as he promised to release her."

"So I performed the ceremony, reading it from the dead priest's book, and Miss Courtney may feel glad that she is not bound by marriage ties."

"Indeed, I do feel happy that such is the case, for I could never have loved Mr. Carson, kind as he was to me."

"But I shall send the price of his ransom and free him from the wretches," said the maiden, earnestly.

"And I will take the ransom for you, Miss Courtney," said Bill.

"And you will tell him that you were no priest, yet let him know that I acted in good faith?"

"Yes; he shall know all; but to continue:

"We left the retreat, for I promised Mr. Carson that I would see that Miss Courtney got her fortune, and Irish Mike came as our guide, intending to return when he put us on the right trail to the fort."

"But, Colonel Burr, the poor devil is not bad at heart, and I promised him that you would forgive him and make a soldier of him if he would come on with me, and he has done so."

"Besides, he aided me in the killing of one and capture of another of the Buckskin Bravos, and the very ones whom I told you the Blackfeet took off as prisoners."

"Ah, yes! Barney and Nesbit were their names?"

"Yes, sir; and they escaped from the Indians, and were making their way to join their outlaw pals when we met them."

"And one you killed?"

"Yes, sir—I had to do it."

"Which one?"

"Barney, sir."

"Well, you have Nesbit?"

"Yes, Irish Mike is guarding him."

"Then I shall have him hanged at sunrise, and Irish Mike can begin his service to the Government by being his executioner, after which I will turn him over to Lockwood here as a soldier."

"But, Hickok, you certainly do not intend to return to those outlaws to ransom out that man Carson?"

"I do not intend to take any ransom money, sir, but I intend to return, for Mr. Carson is none other than the Spider, Colorado King, who so cleverly caught the Fly, Miss Courtney, in his web," was the reply of Wild Bill, and it brought quickly to their feet the two officers and the maiden in unfeigned horror and amazement.

"Great God! Hickok, can you mean this?" cried Colonel Burr, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"It is true, sir."

"That Colorado King is the man Carson, who inveigled this poor girl from her home?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought he was dead."

"So did I, sir."

"Why, he went over the bridge into the ravine, you told me?"

"He did, sir, and in some most miraculous way he escaped, and though he wears a heavy false beard, I recognized him at once as Colorado King, and I suspected that he was not dead, when Mrs. Richmond described the man with whom Miss Courtney had left Chicago."

"Oh, sir! is this the man who murdered my parents?" cried Clarice, white as a corpse.

"He is the man."

"Then may God's punishment fall upon him, is my prayer!" fervently said the maiden.

"It shall, Miss Courtney, and I will be the humble instrument Providence selects to bring punishment upon him," was Wild Bill's impressive answer.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

IRISH MIKE IN SERVICE.

BRIGHT and early the following morning, Wild Bill, who seemed not to know fatigue, started off upon his perilous mission of capturing Colorado King, while Clarice, after a rest of a day and night, departed on her sad errand, escorted by Harry Lockwood and his entire company of gallant troopers, for neither Colonel Burr nor himself cared to risk a smaller force where the life of the young girl was at stake.

Before Wild Bill left the post, however, an important affair took place, which was nothing more than the hanging of Nick Nesbit, the outlaw.

Irish Mike did his work well as executioner, and urged the outlaw, who was wholly unnerved:

"To die loike a man, if yez have lived like a dog."

Then Irish Mike set off with Wild Bill, as he asked to accompany him, and the scout felt that he might be made useful.

Colonel Burr had offered Bill as many soldiers as he cared to take with him, to aid in the capture of the outlaws; but he had refused, stating that he believed he could accomplish more by strategy than with force.

Upon leaving the post, Wild Bill and Irish Mike took the trail direct for Black Hermit Canyon.

As upon his arrival the scout was dressed in his priestly garb, but Mike carried a trusty Winchester which Harry Lockwood loaned him, for Bill's rifle had been left at the station, as it did not look very well for a priest to go armed through the country, preaching peace with powder and ball.

Arriving at Black Hermit Canyon, Wild Bill found Red Star delighted to see him, while the negro, she said, had taken a short run after game.

He had treated her most kindly, she said, but she was delighted to see the scout and anxious to get back to her people.

"Does the Red Star wish to help her young braves find some scalps?" asked Wild Bill.

"Oh, yes! the Red Star will be glad to go on the war-path," was the ready answer.

"The Red Star knows the trail to her village?"

"As the Red Star knows her own face when she sees it in the waters of the brook."

"Could the Red Star go to her village and return here with ten of her braves before another sun comes?"

"Yes."

"Will she do so?"

"The white chief asks it?"

"I do."

"My braves will not be met by the warriors of the pale-face?"

"No."

"Then the Red Star will go, and her braves will return with her before another sun shall come."

"She may tell them that each one shall have a scalp to take back in triumph to their village with them."

"My braves will be glad," said Red Star, and five minutes after she was mounted upon her pony and urging him along at a swift gallop on the trail to the village of her tribe.

Having seen her depart, Wild Bill turned to Irish Mike and said:

"Mike, you know that I am no priest now?"

"Yis, your riverince—I mane, yis, sur: bad-luck to meself for a fool for belavin' a man with sich an eye could be contint to pray sinful sows out of Purgathory."

"And I can trust you, Mike?"

"Thrust me, is it? Jist be afther thrying me."

"I'll hang you without trying you if you play me false; but I do not doubt you, Mike, and you shall be well paid for the work you do, and become a soldier, too."

"Maybe I'll be a ginerall yit, sur."

"Maybe you will, Mike; but it will be some time before that comes to pass."

"A year or two, sur."

"Yes, a century or two; but can I trust you to go to the Roost?"

"Begorra! I'm your lad, sur."

"I wish you to return there and tell Mr. Carson—"

"The chafe, as you knows him?"

"Yes; tell Colorado King that you saw the lady and myself in sight of the post, and that I sent word that I would return in a few days with the ransom money."

"Divil a bit will he see."

"But tell him so."

"Och, sure, and I kin lie with the best of thim, sur."

"Tell him that the lady sent him word that she would also expect to see him after he left the Roost."

"She'll be afther sayin' him hanged, sur."

"She will see him, at any rate."

"Yis, sur."

"Then you remain at the Roost until I come."

"Yis, sir."

"If you think I am suspected—"

"Of being the Whirlwind, sur?"

"Yes, for so I am called; if you see I am suspected, slip out at night, come here and tell me."

"I'll do it, sur."

"Now, Mike, be off as soon as you get your dinner, and serve me well if you wish to save your neck and be well paid for your work."

"I'll do it, sur," responded Mike, and after eating a hasty meal, he mounted his horse and departed, while Wild Bill threw himself down upon a buffalo-robe to rest and await the return of the Black Hermit, who he knew would not be much longer away.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE SCOUT'S PLOT.

WILD BILL had just awakened from a short nap, when the Black Hermit came up at his swinging walk, carrying upon his broad shoulders a deer and some smaller game.

He greeted the scout warmly, yet seemed surprised to find Red Star gone.

His curiosity on that score was soon satisfied, for Wild Bill told him that he had sent her away, and then he opened his door and allowed his wolf to come out, as he had shut him up when he left, fearing he would attack Red Star.

Ham seemed most happy, too, when Wild Bill told him he was to be his guest until the following day, and then the scout added:

"Ham, I want you to be friends with the Blackfeet, for they were not the Indians who killed your master and his family."

"No, massa; dem was Sioux, cuss 'em!"

"Well, Red Star is coming back to-morrow, and I have asked her to bring some warriors with her."

"Golly! thar'll be a tremenjous fight, massa."

"No, they are coming to do some work

for me, and will be most friendly toward you."

"Well, massa, if you say it's all right, I am satisfy."

"I do say so, Ham, and I will have some work for you to do, too."

"I'll be dar, sah."

"I know that you will; but now tell me, do you not know Colorado King and his band?"

"De Buckskin Bravos, sah?"

"Yes."

"Yas, I knows 'em."

"Are you friendly with them?"

"Well, sah, dey has helped some time when I were in a tight place wid de Sioux, and I likes 'em for it, though I hain't got much use fer men as lives by stealin' from oder folkses."

"I am glad to hear you say so; but do you know where their camp is?"

"The last one?"

"Yes."

"On de peak?"

"Yes."

"I knows it, sah, fer I told Massa Colorado King whar it was, and what a good place it would be fer a hidin'-place."

"Well, to-morrow I am going there, and I wish you to go there for me, also."

"I'll go, sah."

"Then that settles it, and now I can rest content until Red Star and her braves arrive," said Wild Bill, evidently greatly pleased at the way his plot was working.

True to her promise, in the early glimmer of the following morning, Red Star came galloping down the canyon with half a score of braves at her back.

They halted before the cavern, and seemed a little surprised to see both Wild Bill and the Black Hermit, but Red Star said a few words to them in a low tone, and they remained as stolid as statues.

"Now, Ham, I wish you to go with all speed to the Roost, and tell Colorado King that there is a rich train going down the Dead Man's Valley, and it only has six men to guard it, and that as many of his band can ambush it to-night at Wolf Den Pass."

"Tell them to start at once, and when you approach Wolf Den Pass, you drop back, and I will see that they are caught in a trap."

"Do you understand?"

"Yas, massa."

"Then go at once."

The negro, who was always armed, darted away at a run which Wild Bill knew he could keep up for hours, and then, mounting his horse, the scout led Red Star and her warriors on the trail to Wolf Den Pass.

This pass seemed formed by nature for a place of ambuscade, and so few ever went that way, either Indian, trapper, or guide, that it had become the retreat of a pack of wolves.

It had steep sides, covered with dwarf trees, ran a zigzag course for a mile, and at the entrance and outlet merged into a lovely valley.

Several times hostiles had met there and had severe battles, and human bones were scattered about in profusion, for those who fell in the pass were always left for the wolves.

As it would not be wise for Wild Bill to leave a trail for the outlaws to see, and thus suspect trouble, he had to make a wide circuit to gain the lower end of the pass.

Once there he soon had the Indians conceal their ponies, and then he located each warrior to the best advantage, intending that the outlaws should get hemmed in, in front and rear, before a shot should be fired.

To his great delight, Wild Bill, who went himself on a scout to see if his foes were coming, spied the outlaws, eight in number, coming along at a brisk pace through the valley, and the Black Hermit, though on foot, following with apparent ease.

"They are so anxious to rob and kill, that they have not delayed an instant after the negro gave them the news," he muttered.

Placing a small glass to his eye he continued:

"Yes, Colorado King has remained at the Roost, and sent Sergeant Duff in command."

"That is just as I wished it to be."

Returning to the pass, he told the warriors

to be on their guard, for their foes were coming, and then he quietly went back up the canyon and secured a hiding-place which the outlaws must pass.

He had not long to wait before they came along, Sergeant Duff in advance, and all of them laughing and chatting together in anticipation of their red work and the spoils they were to get.

"Whar is the nigger?" called out one, as he glanced back and did not see the Black Hermit.

"Oh, he jist stopped ter take a stone out o' his moc'sin," was the response, and the party passed on, while Wild Bill came out of his hiding-place just as the Black Hermit appeared, coming slowly along.

"Well, Ham, you have done well," he said.

"Thankee, massa; but whar is de Injuns?"

Before an answer could be returned, there came the crack of rifles, and then followed a series of wild yells.

No answering shots or cries were heard, and silence following, Wild Bill said quietly:

"Come, Ham, for the Blackfeet have done their work well."

Arriving upon the scene they found the red-skins masters of the field, and in possession of their foes' scalps and ponies.

"Now, Ham, mount one of their horses and lead them back to your canyon, where you must find them a secure camping-place."

"I will arrive there to-night, some time."

"Yas, massa."

"But first take the clothing of these dead men and put it all together upon one pony, for I may need it."

"Yas, massa," answered the Black Hermit and then, after a moment, he said:

"Massa Bill?"

"Well, Ham?"

"Is you gwine to de Roost?"

"Yes."

"An' you 'spects some time soon to light in 'pon dem outlaws dar?"

"Yes, very soon."

"Waal, Massa Bill, I has a favor to ax of you."

"What is it, Ham, for I will be glad to please you?"

"Yer see dar is one pusson in de Roost dat I don't want ter see hurted."

"Who is that, Ham?"

"Dey calls her Kittie, de Sport, sah."

"Ah! I have heard that there was a woman connected with the band, but never saw her."

"Who is she, Ham?"

"She were de darter o' ther former cap'n of de band, and she sabe my life on't."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sah, she come along jist in time ter tackle a b'ar that was makin' it more dan hot for me, an' she tuk me to my house an' sent one of de band ter look arter me."

"His name were Barney, and I w'u'dn't want ter see him hurted nuther, ef he were thar, but dey tole me you hed kilt him some time ago, when I axed dem to-day."

"Yes, Barney is out of all troubles now, Ham; but tell me more of this Kittie the Sport."

"Waal, sah, all I knows is dat day calls her dat, and she don't take no part in de performance o' robbin' folkses, tho' she do play a peert game o' keerds, and wins de dust from de Buckskins mighty lively."

"And she is in the Roost now?"

"Yas, sah, but she am laid up from being hurted by a wounded elk some time ago, though she is nigh about well now."

"Well, Ham, Kittie the Sport shall not suffer, I assure you," answered Wild Bill, and mounting his horse he rode off on the trail to the Robbers' Roost, while Red Star and her braves returned with the negro to Black Hermit's Canyon.

CHAPTER L.

KITTY THE SPORT.

A most anxious watch did Mr. Carson, or as the reader now knows him, Colorado King, keep for the coming of the priest, even before the time when it was possible for him to get back and attend to what it was expected that he would do.

Irish Mike had arrived all right and informed him that the priest would be back

mighty soon, and to prove this the more fully he had added on his own account:

"That we met a sojer, sur, afore I left thim, and thet sojer says, says he, thet the goold was ather having been brought by that wild Whirlwind o' the Wist, Bill Hickok, to the fort afore he was lavin' for Southern parts, so that the young leddy, sur, will find the dust awaitin' her."

This news pleased Colorado King greatly, and he paced to and fro upon the peak, where he could obtain a good view of the trail leading to the Roost.

"I am in luck," he muttered, "for that train, which I have sent Duff to Wolf Den Pass to attack, will doubtless pan out well, and the priest will soon be here, for surely that girl will never go back on me."

"No, no, she would not desert me, I know, believing me to be different from what I really am."

"And she'll not keep me away from her, either, for I will win her love, by fair means if I can for the sake of peace; but if she is stubborn, then a knife will end her, and as she is my wife, I will have her gold."

"Ha! ha! this was a clever game of mine, and it will win, too, and then I shall hunt Wild Bill up and avenge myself on him—Ha! Kittie, you look like a ghost, and startled me," and the man turned quickly as a slender form appeared before him.

It was a young girl, very pale, yet very pretty, and she was dressed in a jaunty suit of buckskin, with a short skirt, leggings and hunting-shirt.

About her waist was a belt of arms, and she looked like one who would use them.

She now appeared like one who had been ill, and in fact was just recovering from a wound she had received from a wounded elk.

The daughter of a man who had once been honorable and held rank in the army, but whom dissipation and gambling had driven to outlawry, she had been carried by her father to the retreat of the robbers, and grown up in their midst.

Never had she taken a hand in their robberies, and her days had been passed in hunting and trapping, her evenings in camp in card-playing, and she 'most always won from those whom she played with.

Her father had been killed a year previous, before the band came up into the Black Hills from the Overland trails, and she had remained with the outlaws.

Colorado King and others had sought to win her love, but to all she gave the cold shoulder, and was, in a measure, feared by the outlaws, whom she frequently held in check from doing red deeds.

"Yes; I do not wonder that you are afraid of ghosts, when you have on your conscience the lives of so many human beings," was the sneering response of the girl.

"We will not discuss that, Kittie, but tell me how you are?"

"Oh, I am well again, and I would have been up before, had I known of the little game you were playing against a poor girl whom you brought to this camp."

"Take care, Kittie Clyde; do not go too far," threateningly said the chief.

"Bah! I do not fear you, Colorado King, though men tremble at your name, and I warn you not to attempt any high-handed game against one of my own sex, or I will thwart you," and with this the young girl walked away, while Colorado King muttered:

"The girl is inclined to be troublesome, and if I was going to remain chief of this band I'd get rid of her."

"But I will soon be away, and then she can worry Duff, whom I will leave as chief—Ha! there comes the priest at last!"

"Now I will know all, and my lucky star is in the ascendant."

"Now to put on my false beard and play the part of Mr. Carson, the outlaws' captive," and with a smile of triumph Colorado King hastened away to his stone hut to prepare to keep up his plot of villainy.

CHAPTER LI.

CATCHING AT THE BAIT.

WHEN Wild Bill, in his garb of a priest, rode up to the Roost, he was met by an outlaw guard, and was told that Mr. Carson

could be seen at once, but that he had been kept bound since the departure of his wife.

He was then led out, and taking from a pair of saddle-bags he carried, several bags of gold-dust, the supposed priest said:

"This is the gold sent as a ransom, so let your chief see that it is right."

"Oh, it are all right, as I knows what gold is," said an outlaw, acting as spokesman.

"Then I suppose your captive can now go with me?"

"Yes; and we'll be glad to get rid of him, for he are awful troublesome," was the answer.

Colorado King was most anxious himself to get away, as he feared that Kittie, the Sport, might put in an appearance and ruin all, so he was led off by the outlaws to a cabin, and there giving them a share of the gold, placed the rest in his blanket, which he rolled up and tied to his saddle.

Then he came out and told the supposed priest in a joyous tone that he was free.

As they were about to ride away Kittie was seen approaching, but Colorado King hastened off, and they left the Roost just as the sun touched the western horizon.

"So you got safely to the post?" asked the outlaw chief.

"Oh, yes, and as the scout— Wild Bill, you call him, I believe?"

"Yes, Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West, he is called, and he is a perfect hurricane, too."

"Well, he had given Colonel Burr a chart of where to find the gold, and so I had no difficulty in getting what was needed for your ransom."

"Ah, yes, and it was noble in Clarice, my beautiful wife, to send it for my ransom."

"But where is she?—for you could not have taken her to Cheyenne, of course."

"No, but we will meet her, for I go now to pass the night at the home of a poor negro, whom I know well."

"Ha! the Black Hermit?"

"Yes, so he is called, and we can go on from there in the morning."

"Well, that will do, and I am so glad to know that Clarice will not drive me from her."

"No, she will see you," was the evasive reply, and the two rode on in the darkness, the outlaw wondering at the pretended priest's knowledge of the country.

At last they arrived at the canyon, and a hail from the priest brought an answer from the Black Hermit.

"Ham, can you take care of two of us, to-night?"

"Is dat you, Massa Priest?"

"Yes."

"I kin take car' ob you, sah— Git out ob de way an' quit dat growlin', you out-dashus wolf. Come in, sah."

The two men dismounted at the door, which Ham now threw open, showing a bright fire-light within the cavern, and while the negro took their horses, they entered.

"Sit down, Mr. Carson," said Wild Bill, placing a rude chair for the outlaw, who sunk into it as though mechanically.

"Now, Colorado King, you are my prisoner!"

Quick as thought Wild Bill had turned upon him and covered him with a revolver.

Turning deadly pale, Colorado King tried to rise from the chair, but was forced back, while the Black Hermit stepping into the door also held him covered, and said:

"Better keep quiet, bad man, for dis gun kin go off."

"Trapped!" hissed the outlaw.

"Yes, Colorado King, or Kent Kingsley, you caught at my bait, and the gold dust which I invested in ransom I will get back, as I know you have the most of it with you."

"Did I lose it all, I would be well repaid in catching you."

"Now I know you, Wild Bill Hickok!" hoarsely said the outlaw.

"Yes, and it has took you a long time to find me out; but this disguise has served me well, and I put it on to track you, Kent Kingsley."

"I went to Chicago, to keep my pledge to that dying woman, for I believed you dead, and there I discovered your little game to get that poor girl's fortune, and I hold trumps against your poor hand."

"Oh, curses upon you! to think that after I took that fearful leap from the bridge

and escaped death, that I should thus be caught," hissed Colorado King, his face livid with rage.

"And more, Sir Chief, the gold-train your men went after to-day existed in my imagination, and their scalps are now hanging at the belts of my allies, Red Star and her Blackfoot braves, who to-morrow will add to their gory trophies, for we go to attack your stronghold now, and, dressed in the buckskin attire of those who were slain to-day, no one at the Roost will suspect that we are not their comrades returning."

"Now, Ham, secure this man, and I leave him to your care."

"I keep him, sah," was the ready answer, and taking from his pocket some irons he had brought from the fort, Wild Bill handed them to the negro, who quickly slipped them upon the wrists and ankles of the prisoner.

Then Red Star and her braves were called, and all mounting, with Colorado King bound to his horse, the party set forth for the Robbers' Roost, where seven of the Buckskin Bravos yet remained, besides Irish Mike and Kitty the Sport.

CHAPTER LII.

CONCLUSION.

A FEW words more, kind reader, and the long trail of Wild Bill the Whirlwind of the West, which we have followed so untiringly through its wanderings in the Black Hills, is ended.

Without the death of one of his allies, and only a few slight wounds to several of the warriors, the Robbers' Roost was carried, and the scalps of the outlaws, with the plunder, went to the braves of Red Star.

Irish Mike and Kitty the Sport were, of course, not harmed, and accompanied the scout back to the post, while Red Star and her warriors returned to their people, the Indian girl feeling that she loved the white chief in vain, but declaring that her braves should not again take the war-path against the pale-faces.

Ham, the Black Hermit, declined Wild Bill's request to go and live at the post, preferring his solitary life, so he went back to his den in the canyon, while the scout continued on his way to the camp with his prisoners, and was followed by Kitty the Sport and Irish Mike, both of the latter being happy that the band of outlaws was broken up.

Arriving at the post, Wild Bill was greeted with wild cheers, and at once was closeted with Colonel Burr to whom he told the story of his capture.

Soon after Lieutenant Harry Lockwood returned with Clarice Courtney, and they had accomplished what they went for, as Mrs. Courtney's body had been removed to a grave by the side of her husband, and the gold had been found and brought to the post.

And, I may as well here remark that the trip into the Hills together, played havoc with the hearts of both Harry Lockwood and Clarice, and to such an extent that the maiden some months after became the bride of the handsome lieutenant.

Colorado King had a fair trial, was found guilty and was hanged, Irish Mike again serving as hangman, dressed in a new uniform, for he had become a soldier.

Kittie the Sport was adopted as a Child of the Regiment, and soon was a favorite with all, but particularly so with a young sergeant, whose wife she became.

As for Wild Bill, his deeds have gone down to history, and we can only drop a tear to his memory, and regret that a man so brave should have fallen by the hand of a cowardly assassin and thus have the star of his life set in gloom.

THE END.

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